

He For God Only



by

The Author of
'The Yellow Aster'





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HE FOR
GOD ONLY



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BY
KATHLEEN CAFFYN
(*"Iota"*)

Author of
"A Yellow Aster,"
"Anne Mauleverer,"
"Poor Max," . . .
. . . etc., etc. . .

*"He for God only; she for
God and him."*—MILTON.

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HE FOR GOD ONLY.

CHAPTER I.

ALTHOUGH the natural diffidence of Miss Rebecca Westcar might deprecate any conscious emulation upon her part of the methods of Julius Cæsar, as labelled in her early lesson books, yet after her own humble fashion did she follow hot upon the heels of that energetic man.

To attack less than three definite occupations at the one time, irrespective of any indefinite ones each teeming moment might upheave, would have struck Miss Westcar as a flaccid waste of the gifts a discriminating Providence had seen fit to place in capable hands.

Upon this brilliant morning in mid May she was carefully weighing out little brown powders, full of groans and wailing, with Hope, we can but trust and believe, at the bottom of each buff pot; jotting down notes for a new system of village recruiting; studying a flamboyant diagram of a horse with a view to reassuring herself upon a matter in which she and her veterinary surgeon had diametrically opposed views; thinking of marriage in a general sort of way, and in particular of the imminent espousals of little Joan Westcar—a far-off cousin she had seen yesterday for the first time—with young George Winnington, Curate, but what was of vastly more importance to her, as to all the other ladies in the sorrowing Parish, son of old Jasper Winnington, of Thryng; a gentleman with many satanic gifts and an inexhaustible fund of electric surprises.

She was keeping a relentless eye, moreover, upon a bevy of neat maids flitting with self-conscious alacrity to and forth in the house opposite.

In the intervals of thought and action, in a lenient and

unexacting way, Miss Rebecca admired Nature. Applauding the efforts of this somewhat skittish maiden, condoning her offences, sifting any incongruities apparent in her ways and means by the canons of a sane and mellow intelligence; succeeding generally, therefore, in reducing irritating contradictions to a decent and workable order. The last touch of an expert hand, Miss Westcar found, did much for Nature, whilst a free interpretation of the vagaries in all things mutable, is, to be sure, the privilege of the thoughtful.

"Marriage——" began Miss Rebecca, then paused to loosen a grey sun-bonnet from its moorings. When she desired to taste the air or look around her, Miss Rebecca was obliged to wear her bonnet on the back of her neck, since it was fashioned in the form of blinkers joined in the centre, and built upon a foundation of stout cardboard; but the unostentatious simplicity of the structure had appealed to her now for five-and-thirty years.

"Marriage," she resumed, "at best is but an empiric state, and will remain so till the day of judgment, when we may, perhaps, hope for some reasonable summing up of the evidence on both sides." She paused upon a white powder.

"Let me see," she murmured, glancing up at a list of names pinned to a text, "this is for Smith, the carrier—an impregnable constitution. I'd better double it. The girl's nothing in particular—amiable and insular. Ah, well! for a man of his figure, George can stand a deal of dullness. It's that marvellous uplifted spirit of his—the apotheosis I take it of the Winnington temper. The high falutin' tantrums of that Spanish great-grandmother of his refined in the crucible of the sufferings they brought upon her and her descendants. The oaths of the lady they say rang with poetry. Her prayer was an idyll."

With a sudden dropping of her face, Miss Rebecca wavered between two powders, her depression, as she gazed, obviously increasing.

It was noticeable that upon her drug morning, Miss Westcar frequently took gloomy views of life.

The science of drugs, as well she knew, like marriage, was also in an empiric state, and she liked certainty.

She found a weird pleasure, indeed, in tracking the workings of incongruous elements in the human frame. Patient

observation she was aware tended to widen a mind already attuned to benevolence, and to circumvent the local doctor was a perennial delight.

Twenty-seven, this Dr. Baker, a stack of vain theory and vaunting experiment, who defied, with arrogant presumption, all established authority, together with every ancient observance that made for respectability.

Dr. Baker's inroads upon the village faith stirred Miss Rebecca to her depths.

At the same time, young Nell Hone's life hung upon a thread, and drugs can be as tricky as doctors.

Miss Rebecca looked up, heavily frowning, to see Joan Westcar running lightly towards her down the shining path.

"Goodness gracious!" muttered Miss Westcar, forgetting Baker, and scattering an expensive powder; "now is that ridiculous face of hers due to George or the spirit of God? An inspiration it certainly is," she pondered, staring in her leisurely way, "founded, I shrewdly suspect, upon inexperience and carnal affection. We'll have trouble here. And I flattering myself we'd caught a nice tame domestic hen that'd be clucking round comfortably in a week or so, causing no inconvenience to anyone. Instead, another empiric state on my hands, as though I hadn't enough without it! A girl with all her points before her to marry an apostolic diathesis, with the digestion of an ostrich!"

"You seem amazingly happy, child," she said in her fine guttural voice, stifling a sigh.

"Oh! It's all been so beautiful," Joan said. "I—I am so happy that I had to run all the way home. I'm glad I did," she cried, pulling off her gloves, "for now I can help you. George said I'd be late."

With a tragic air, Miss Rebecca fished a handful of brown blobs from out the depths of a cavernous jar, and plunged them into a great white mortar.

"You can grind these," said she. "The smell is pungent, but wholesome."

The next minute Joan was coughing and sneezing violently, but she ground on undaunted, and her face delicately glanced and glowed like a little clove-pink in the morning sun.

"It was perfect," she said breathlessly, between her sneezes. "The people's faces, the old shepherd in his

smock, the big, moon-faced men, there were tears—tears in their eyes. "Oh! there were," she protested to Miss Rebecca's primmed mouth. "And the stillness all full of melody, and the big bed of lilies outside, and the birds singing in the trees, and—and George's face."

"Dear me! Where did you sit?"

"In the front pew."

"So I thought, right under George's nose."

Joan flushed, but once started she could not now stop.

"George was so pleased. That young Dr. Baker was there."

"Bless my soul!"

"He said he'd come if he could, since it's George's last week-day service. But George was afraid. He's so extraordinarily honest."

"Who? George?"

"No, no, Dr. Baker. He'd never have come unless he could feel everything, just—oh!—just as he ought to."

"Very satisfactory, certainly, and a marked departure. I've had dealings with Dr. Baker every day these twelve months, and never yet have known him to feel anything whatsoever, just as he ought to. He is about the most perverse and wrong-thinking person it's been my lot yet to encounter."

The lamps behind Joan's eyes flickered, her mouth trembled.

"I wish you'd seen him to-day."

"Did he also sit in the front pew?"

"No. In the chancel."

"Better still for purposes of observation."

Miss Rebecca flicked the lid from off a steaming pot and the shed reeked with horrors. But in no sort of a way did this disturb the lady; the odour was a healing one, and she was in no mood for compromise.

Joan thought with all her might of Peter and the cloth of common things, but she screwed up her nose.

Miss Rebecca grasping in their fell import these mixed symptoms raked round in search of an illustration from Nature to point the moral.

The dispensary was a summer-house full of light, set in an old garden, for Miss Rebecca made it her rule of life to combine beauty with pills.

A thrush was singing passionately in a tulip tree. Roses, lilies, and a thousand herbs, flung sweet incense to Heaven; with honey-like dew upon the leaves, the bees lolled drowsy in the cool hearts of the flower cups. Earth, sky, and air were bright with joy and promise. Joan's spirit refused to be dashed. Flinging the lessons of gross smell and subtle reason to a dusty earth, it shot up again to the jewelled Heaven of the hymns.

Lifting her eyes to peer into an upper window, Miss Rebecca noticed the thrush mad with melody, break off his song with a gurgle, suddenly dart to earth and bury himself bodily in a clump of blue forget-me-nots. Presently with another gurgle he threw up his head, and in his beak there wagged a mighty worm. "Joan," cried Miss Rebecca. "Look!"

Joan dropped from Heaven to the worm with a shudder.

"Now there's a parable from Nature exactly fitted to your case," said Miss Rebecca. "That thrush singing not five minutes ago like a choir of Angels is now choking himself with a fat worm, which brings us down at once to the bed-rock of common sense and the idiocy of permitting yourself to become the shuttlecock of accessories. The hand of God," she pursued, pounding a sickly-looking yellow root between two towels, "is just as apparent in that nourishing worm as in the rapturous song of the thrush. There is a vast deal of the fat worm in all true religion, that is, in the religion which will wear sufficiently well to stand the strain of custom. To maintain a sane outlook you must work up from the bottom. George, youth, change of air, the spectacular effect of the altar this morning, and its flowers and candlesticks have spurred you to a rapture not unlike the thrush's, but tempered and relieved by none of the thrush's homely tastes. It's a rapture that'll starve itself. You can't live upon white flame. I, for my part, not being in love with George, knowing, likewise, that old Tabitha Storm worked that altar cloth for £10, and spent the proceeds upon linen for the workhouse, so coarse that it gave the poor paupers a rash; also that the candlesticks made the late Rector and all the old maids in the Parish squabble like cats, can preserve my wonted calm. And yet this knowledge interferes as little with my prayers as do the flecks in the sun dim his potent glory. I am a good

Church-woman, I hope, and yet I can—Joan take that pencil, your hands are dry, and put down in that note-book—Memo. Martial music and the question of treating recruits—and now turn that diagram—so. As I was saying, I am a good Church-woman, and yet I can imagine Church work, when it becomes an inevitable part of the day's work, growing worse than any Chinese torture. The devotion of a wife is another thing altogether from the fervour of first love. You won't always be seeing George in every petal—much more likely, indeed, in time you'll be forgetting the flowers, and just see the tarnished tin vessels that hold them."

Joan's hand trembled on the pestle. Miss Rebecca nodded at the book. "Write down. Query.—How far is one justified in making duty to country secondary to duty to neighbour? The waste of material in flunkies makes me sick! Goodness, child, *that's* not to be entered."

"I, I've loved the Church ever since I've had the chance to do so," said Joan, resuming her pestle.

"No doubt you have, my child. It's been the one touch of poetry in your dull life. It's been your one haven of rest. Did you ever feel free while your father lived save in Church?—answer me that—!"

"No!" she said meekly.

"Where did you generally see George?"

"Oh! it wasn't *that*——"

"That was the foundation stone. It is not the one we are told to select."

"Have I done enough of these things?" said Joan, in dull despair.

Miss Rebecca craned over to look, and tossed some berries into the bowl.

And at the first turn of Joan's hand the place smelt like a sepulchre.

"Play what pranks you please with the others," said Miss Rebecca, emerging suddenly from her private reflections, "but never make a god of the parson you mean to marry. It ends in speedy disillusion, or means hanging a millstone around your neck."

"Cousin Rebecca, you're cutting every single thing from under my feet."

"On the contrary, Joan, I'm doing my level best to get you out of the clouds on to firm ground."

"Must everything then be common and unclean? Must we never look up?"

"I'm doing my best to prove to you that there's nothing in all this wide earth either common or unclean. Nor is it always necessary to be staring into the skies to find God. But I see what you're after," said she, with a deep bass sigh, "I might as well be whistling to the winds."

She broke off to ponder upon the back muscle of the horse, then turned again to Joan.

"The danger of starting life in a country peopled with unearthly cherubs, is that you are apt to grow so deadly sick of spirit, you'll be running next to the opposite extreme and wanting all sense."

In her agitation, Miss Rebecca here began to tick the situation off upon the tips of her handsome, drug-stained fingers.

"*Your* religion, founded upon the dullness of life and the picturesqueness of George, George's upon the Rock of Ages, George's own reflection shining in your eyes, your eyes are charming, girl—George taking it for the light of Heaven. A pretty kettle of fish to be sure."

"And I," groaned Miss Rebecca, "am the biggest fool of the three, for shedding round unasked advice."

She gazed fixedly at the singular look of youth in Joan's every gesture, and again groaned.

"No woman," she murmured, after a pause, "save one in sore need of repentance, or who, having exhausted every other amusement wants a new sensation, should marry a man with the spirit of a martyr in him. He'll be judging her from the martyr-crown point of view, and she'll have a life of it! her soul stretched day and night on a rack. Good gracious, but won't she suffer?"

"Oh! What do you want? What am I to do?"

"Do? The only thing you can do in the circumstances is to continue to reflect George," said Miss Rebecca, hitching up her sun-bonnet. "It will be a perennial source of satisfaction to him. No amount of holiness will damp the egoism of a healthy man. And remember that a man expects a lot from his glorified self. He gets used likewise to that form of stimulant provided by her," she said,

solemnly, "and is quite likely to become in time a sort of spiritual vampire."

Joan's eyes uttered a mute cry.

"Once you've created a demand for this supply," proceeded Miss Rebecca; "you can't cut it off. Don't forget that. Dear me! There's George."

Joan's quivering lips grew still.

As she freed her fingers of the brown powder, Miss Rebecca's eyes shone proudly upon the tall young man.

"You'll have to see also that he has good nourishing meals," she commanded, with a stern nod at Joan. "These early services are wearing."

CHAPTER II.

GEORGE WINNINGTON'S brown, irregular face frequently set his friends speculating. In all its traits and lineaments so comfortably did the lion lie down with the lamb that one wondered whether, indeed, that fierce ravener had not been imbibing the leading characteristics of the weaker beast, a theory contradicted by a muzzled look about George. And to muzzle anything, to be sure, is neither to subdue instinct, nor yet modify species.

A great practical nose notwithstanding the delicate carving of its fine nostrils, went oddly with the brow of a poet, and visions lurk but whimsically in the keen, clear, decisive eye of a soldier.

The methods of George partook of the unprofessional variety in his brown face, and although they might not have seemed the best preparation for a successful clerical career, he had found them to answer very well.

For example, he took the divine patience of woman with her inexhaustible power of work with a great stoop of the spirit, whilst her flutterings of heart and hereditary leanings towards the cassock he dismissed with a blasphemously light laugh. In short, the Rev. George Winnington used the devout feminine mind largely, but constrained it—to the best of his ability—well understood—to revolve around the Christ and not the curate.

There were, indeed, enough incongruities in George to

scatter and disperse any career, but these marshalled and disciplined by a military outlook, sincerity, and a zeal, dread, amazing, as tireless as it was untirable, made on the whole for progress in a difficult path.

And even if a three years' curacy, full of passionate labours, well winnowed with family tempests not devoid of a grim humour, may have left George still at the portals of the true inwardness of things as regarded both himself, woman and man, he had grown neither morbid, sleek, nor cock-sure, nor was he unfair toward any but himself, and the inevitable *one* he would be certain to exalt far above himself.

It is alone for him who has fallen by the way, or is a much better saint than ever poor George could hope to be, to reach man—more especially woman—or his own depths, saving through much tribulation, whilst to give unquenchable Spirit a free hand over Sense, as quenchless, will throw any man a trier out of gear, so long as he brings to the mighty conflict, only the simple weapons of a pure youth.

This stern grappling with Nature, to give George his due, he applied only to himself, however; with those made in like fashion to him he used more reasonable methods; and could seemingly discern herbs most sweet and delicate, growing in and around the very roots of *their* grosser growths, which stayed the violence of his pruning knife.

However much her eyes may have betrayed her, there was but little love in Miss Rebecca's voice when it broke presently the silence of George's content, Joan's worship, and her own scientific absorption in the preparation of her exquisite coffee.

"Upon my word, George, I can't believe my eyes," said she. "You've gulped down every morsel of your curry as though it were Irish stew, and are now starting on the Bombay duck. It really is too bad. It's those sort of things that keep reminding one after all that you are no more than a curate."

George passed up his plate promptly.

"Awfully sorry for bringing up the shameless fact. Give me some more, and don't tell Hughes."

"A man who forgets himself in the small things will be sure to forget every one else in them also. Selfishness with a touch of religion about it is as double-faced as it's

mawkish. If the truth were known, I daresay you were thinking of Baker."

"I'm afraid I was. Joan, don't *you* want some Bombay duck?"

"Yes, please," said Joan, with a shy look at Miss Rebecca. "I'm used to good curries."

"Your father with all his faults was a soldier," boomed the lady. "I'm glad you weren't brought up amidst women and bread-and-butter. Nothing makes such pulp of the moralities. Have you never reflected, George, that there are people fools enough to go to Church for love of you or curiosity as to what you're going to say next?"

"Soldiers enlist for as reasonless reasons," said George, "and yet they make fine regiments."

"If you fought for carnal glory and not for the glory of God, there's the making of a Napoleon, possibly a Napoleon and water—you're too inchoate as yet to decide—in you. Even now to gain your ends I believe you would wade as deep in blood as your rascally prototype, and make shift with as blind a following of riff-raff. Staring at the goal, George, you see, the blood would never put you off. Your humanity, it strikes me, has a leak in it. I wonder how Joan will fare in the Juggernaut procession. I hope, anyhow, she has a taste for the wilderness and locusts. The modern apostle is sure to want to go one better than his model—there won't be any wild honey, Joan, take my word for that. And from the extremely sensible way in which you manage that curry, I doubt if you *have* much natural taste for ungarmished locusts. An acquired taste for that sort of thing wrings the withers. Let's hear about the new recruit, George."

"Oh! Baker! He's a recruit of whom any sergeant might be proud."

"Inability to pass any known medical test does not unfortunately apply to the Church's recruits," sniffed Miss Rebecca. "I myself like Christianity without the trail of pathology upon it. It's so easy to be good if you're sickly. Now you've got him couldn't you convert Baker into a lay-reader, and let the village have a chance to recover some of its lost faith. My tenants, poor creatures, have souls as well as Dr. Baker."

"But it's to their bodies he applies his doubts."

"George! ground ginger is put on the table to be eaten with melon. A curate of three years' standing ought to be aware that the poor judge of everything from an absolutely material point of view. If you fill the minds of a purely agricultural people, two hundred and fifty words to their vocabulary, with doubts as to the methods applied for generations by their betters to their insides, you undermine any faith they're capable of. To my mind there's a heartless levity in putting people, used to bulk and glaring effects, off with scientific explanations, indecent plans of their persons and ridiculous, niggardly doses with all the flavour refined out of them. I don't say the man's explanations may not be reasonable—to a mellowed intelligence, just as his diagrams may be—possibly even his doses. But you've got to earn the right to doubt, even as you've got to earn the right to believe—believe, I mean, in your way, *with* understanding. The meanest intelligence is capable of holding tight to Tradition. Baker is casting pearls before swine and undermining the foundations of the British Constitution. Unless he mend his ways we'll have every man Jack in the place voting radical the next Election, and the recruiting-sergeant may whistle when he comes our way. They'll be all maundering of pruning-hooks, plough-shares, and yard measures, too utterly debased for honest ambition.

Joan's eyes uttered great "Oh's!" but George chuckled.

"Still there are two sides to every question," he pleaded, "and as Baker's been slaving at medicine now for eight years or so, it's only natural he'd like to apply some of his conclusions. If they don't happen to be the conclusions of old Johnson, and the interminable line of Johnsons who went before him, it's not Baker's fault, anyway; it's the fault of his day and generation."

"Baker," sharply rejoined the lady, "has been striving might and main for seven years to pick holes in the knowledge of a glorious past, however you may try to vilify it in order to erect an arrogant structure of letters behind his own undistinguished name. *I* have been studying medicine for upwards of forty years with no hope of earthly reward. I have grown my own herbs, and can honestly say that never in all these years have I presumed to prescribe anything the effects of which I have not first carefully registered in my own person."

Joan gasped unobtrusively.

"I'd like," pursued Miss Rebecca, "to ask you if Baker would know a growing herb if he saw one."

"Botany——"

"Don't talk to me of medical Botany. Dog Latin and the presumptions of atheists. Haven't I been through it all? Baker knows nothing of herbs except from books and salesmen's catalogues. And in the whole course of his life do you think he's offered up his own body as the field of his experiments?"

"The fields already open to him," pleaded George, "are so wide. Besides, how can you expect a man to take notes upon drugs when he's undergoing the tortures just let loose by them?"

"At least, it is honest torture," said the lady grimly, "and may resolve into certainty many a doubt now undoing this wretched generation. I have my own doubts about many a thing," she sighed, "but thank God I have some respect for the human nature in those beneath me. I have studied their tastes, their requirements and their limitations. I *know* them. Set up doubts in a village inside, and it's the beginning of the end. Better start at once to convert the Church into a laundry, the village library into a Temple of Reason."

"Baker," said George mildly, "seems to have let loose other things besides doubts in the East End."

"Oh! no doubt! They're thankful for anything in the East End. They're used to want of consideration, poor wretches, and have not had the advantage of generations of civilizing contact with the thinking classes, and, at least, if they're swelling themselves out with doubts, they can't be burgling and wife-beating. I daresay Baker did well enough in the East End. Why didn't he stay there?"

"Don't you know?"

"I don't, but I have my suspicions."

"And I have facts to give them the lie and leave to tell them to you, but to no one else. Joan? Oh! Joan's myself! Isn't she?"

"Humph! Well?"

"He's got an aneurism which must kill him in a couple of years."

"Who says so, pray?"

"Every specialist in England, France, and Germany. Baker has no mawkish leaning towards death. The question was then, how to make the most of the life at his disposal. Working amongst masses of men seems to be his ruling passion; but he has a lesser one—inventing things. He has an invention on the stocks now, a marvellous thing in Physics, that must have time and quiet for its perfecting. He found he could get these here, and make a living for his mother and himself as well—she spent every penny she had on his education, you see. And it seems there's money in this thing he's working at. If he can get it through in the time he'll be able to see her independent before he dies. She lives abroad, as you know, and knows nothing of the aneurism, thinks he's immersed in discovery for pure love of science, and is delighted to have him out of the East End, on account of infectious diseases and want of society. She's a haughty old dame with notions. Meanwhile, he'd give his soul to be back in the maelstrom." George's eyes lighted. "One can so easily understand the overmastering attraction, once you've been in it," said he.

"Oh, George!" said Joan, with rapt eyes. "I'm so glad he came this morning."

Joan's face was like wine to George. He remembered with a thrill Baker's eyes as he had watched her in Church.

"We'll have Dick over to Thryng, and make him take care of himself," he said.

"Unless you alter very considerably," said Miss Rebecca promptly, "Joan will find her hands quite full enough without Baker. Heart patients are always crochety. The exigencies of professional etiquette would cramp the intellect of a giant, but the man has wit enough, it seems, to couple a scientific invention with hard cash. I wonder if he'd have enough by any chance to allow *something* to the experience of one old enough to be his grandmother. I have gone with particular thoroughness into Aneurism. We had several cases here, and I've studied every conceivable authority on the subject with a mind uncramped by professional prejudice, and I've my own opinion on the subject. Three died in Johnson's hands. One that he relinquished to me, under the name of indigestion, oddly enough lived. It yielded after months of patient treatment to diet and a

decoction of simples I first discovered in a Basque village, and dinned for five years into Johnson's deaf ears. Do you think," she demanded, "that Baker could be induced to try this draught?"

"He couldn't very well refuse, if you asked him."

"No," she said grimly, "but he could throw it behind the fire directly I'd turned my back."

"He wouldn't do that. But he's not the man to take any draught regularly."

Miss Rebecca's natural acuteness paled before her turn for medicine. Like less redoubtable ladies, she had to pay for her passions.

"Oh, I'd see to that!" She lifted her proud head. "The aims and the independence of the young people of the present day make it exceedingly difficult to be of any service to them in their hour of need, and scientific airs seem to me the most odious. Although Science, if anything could, should preserve man, that according to expert scientific opinion has begun in the worm and is likely to end in him, from assuming the manners and customs of the Immortal—there's Carr come about his bandage. Pity," she said, rising, "there's so much of the carpenter and joiner in surgery; it puts one at a disadvantage, and in my opinion, the bones of anatomy and those of human beings have but the faintest likeness one to the other."

"She's thinking," explained George, "of the time she rigged up a leg down in the marshes out of First Aid to the Wounded, and set old Johnson swearing for a month."

"Oh! George!" cried Joan, with a little jump on her chair, "being with you is like being out in the sun. You do things so joyfully. In one minute you've given Dr. Baker a friend—some one to feed him and care for him and amuse him, and you've given Cousin Rebecca a little bit of consolation for the loss of you. I've been wondering how she could possibly manage without something. You seem to come in to every hour of her life. George! what should I have done if you hadn't loved me?"

"Found some one else."

"Some one else! The very thought makes me cold."

"We're a pair of fools, Joan, but that's just exactly how I too feel about it. It's because we can walk hand in hand to the gate, we two, and together keep weariness at

bay, and defy the paralysis of custom—that traitor in the gate, that vampire which sucks the blood of us all, from Archbishop to curate. Let me look at you with your face like that—oh! with you I could do anything—anything.

“I steadier step when I recall
That when I slip thou dost not fall.”

“Quoting poetry, eh?” boomed Miss Rebecca from the door, “and in the full light of the morning!—Let us hope that in ten years from now you may be as glib.”

“That,” said George, “will depend on Joan.”

“Or,” observed Miss Rebecca, “on Joan’s constitution. It’s time we began to test it, by the way. I shall take her to see your mother this afternoon.”

“And while you’re getting through the preliminaries, clearing the course, so to speak, I’ll show Joan the Vicarage.”

“I’ll be at the cross roads at four,” he said, with a laugh, “so you’ll have to get things through by tea-time.”

Miss Rebecca’s large, round eyes—a feature she attributed to a Polish grandmother—why it would be hard to say—rested mildly on the girl, to pounce sharp as a knife back to the man.

“I wonder—if Joan has got anything in the shape of a constitution,” she mused. “I once knew a man, a good man and great, in his way. Anyway, he was a great surgeon, and his wife was his inspiration. He could not bear her out of his sight. If ever he did an important operation, he liked to know that she was as near as circumstances would permit. It was quite a poem. One day he had some terrible thing to do to some poor wretch. It was out in the country, and there was a black frost. His wife was utterly unfit for the jaunt, but a look in his eyes—wonderful, blue eyes they were, too—made her insist upon going, and a woman, even at her last gasp, can always persuade man that she’s throbbing with rude health. She got out at the park gates, and crouched down somewhere in the frost to pray. The operation was successful, but the wife died—there’s nothing to grin at, George.”

“Lucky for Joan, in that case, that I’m not a great surgeon,” said George.

"There are many ways of undermining the constitution of a woman who throws all her power of belief and all her emotions on trust into one man before she's investigated any of the others. Another adaptation of a homely proverb, 'Never put all your eggs into one basket.'"

In moments of intensity, Miss Rebecca did not always pause to consider the full significance of her utterances.

CHAPTER III.

JOAN lifted her pretty eyes to Heaven and thought of George and a golden future.

Miss Rebecca flung hers upon the cholera belt she was engaged in knitting and thought of George's father and a leaden past, whilst the two fat old horses ambled drowsily on towards Thryng, and the burly coachman, inspired by the memory of ecstatic draughts he had whilom enjoyed in the Squire's kitchen, thought mainly of beer. "And four years," he reflected with a plaintive sigh, "sence I druv her to Thryng. Gentle or simple there's no fathom in' the female mind."

Until time and Heaven had brought George, Joan's recollections partook but little of the earthen joys of coachman Brown.

Her father, an officer of Engineers, perhaps to show the world that his vitals were fashioned, after all, of flesh and blood, not cast in the best English steel, suddenly one day, when he was thirty and she eighteen, married a wife. A hasty act of which he promptly repented.

Mrs. Westcar was a pretty, silly, slight creature, who, given enough lawful fruit to keep her quiet, had no natural hankerings after the forbidden. She would have danced herself innocently enough into a fatigued sobriety; the rest might well have been left to time and babies, had not the dreadful silence of suspicion wherewith her husband tracked her merry windings, roused to an artfulness and audacity, not its own, the small dancing devil that sometimes possesses her kind.

One day Mrs. Westcar turned upon a pirouetting toe and calmly laughed in her sleuth-hound's face, and from that

moment the desperate man had ample opportunities of studying the minor ways of minor women with their peculiar range and insistence. The antics of the wife and the investigations of the husband, were interrupted one day by a bolt from the blue in the shape of an expected baby.

Two people more singularly unfitted for the rôle of parent it were hard to conceive.

Mrs. Westcar fell together at the mere thought of domestic joys and an enlarged waist.

Her husband, when he discovered that, by his own act, he had introduced another instrument of wrath into a groaning world—laid waste perhaps the lives of whole generations of Thinking Men—felt as though branded with the brand of Cain.

He made no comment, but when Joan was eight weeks old, he packed her off to England, there to wail up and down the whole gamut of the griefs of Indian children.

Directly she was relieved of her baby, Mrs. Westcar began, in her wilful way, to ache all over for the loss of it.

To assuage her horrid pain and console herself for her mistake in marrying into the Scientific Corps, she danced merrily with every Cavalry man who came to Simla, and snapped her pretty fingers at the women whose dances she had taken. One brilliant night she danced herself into a fever and subsequently died, having done nothing much worse than annoy a husband for seven solid years, and do violence to what might have been the makings of a good woman.

Every man she danced with swore, however, that she was as good a little woman as ever wore French shoes. Probably he knew.

What the women said were best not repeated.

Deprived of his favourite pursuit Colonel Westcar felt restless and returned to England.

He took a Staff appointment and fell to looking after his daughter.

In silence did he track the thoughts of the child and search her reins. In season and out did his haunting solicitude pursue her. No moment was safe from his passion of parental solicitude. Neither work nor play

proved any protection. He was liable to swoop down at any time and lay Joan open.

How Colonel Westcar managed to combine his private with his public duties was a marvel, but in neither did he falter or flinch. Incomparable always was he, both as soldier and parent.

If the mother had eluded him, never should the daughter do so, of that he was firmly resolved.

To simplify matters, the instructors selected for Joan were non-resident, carefully dehumanized machines, and friendships, save under his personal observation, were strictly forbidden.

Dreadful bi-monthly tea-parties were indeed arranged by the anxious father, for the purposes of social culture; when a selection of small quaking creatures ate cakes and cream in the full blaze of his monocle.

Upon these occasions it was his wont to unhook his mind, grappling ever with some imperial problem, and let it come clinking down genially amongst his writhing guests.

It was in truth an instructive spectacle to watch this man of steel and figures devising games of strategic skill for the alarmed squad.

When he could no longer endure the utter absence of anything like spring or spontaneity in the movements of the paralyzed atoms, or of intelligence in their countenances, with a metallic groan but half suppressed, he would try what the narration of historical events, flavoured by an ordered romance, would do for such nebulous fatuity.

When Joan was sixteen, with a pale face, a mind groaning with hard fact, a spirit bowed with obedience, Colonel Westcar quarrelled with his Chief, and went to live in a gloomy old house in Thryng, left him by an uncle.

He brought with him his Indian servants; his own man, more silent than himself; Joan's Ayah, a babbling, kind, irresponsible creature; and a venerable cook as loyal as a pole-star to the stomach of her owner's, but who regarded not their lesser parts.

Sentiment and gossip were thus alike excluded from Joan's path.

The year of their arrival at Thryng was a tumultuous, not to say a riotous, epoch in the life of that leafy hamlet.

Young George Winnington had just returned from Oxford, and with a steady look about his fresh young mouth, had announced his intention of entering the Church.

His mother, the daughter of a Law Lord, knowing how cordially her husband detested both the Law and her relatives who gave distinction to it, from his very birth had destined George to the Woolsack. His decision smote her to the soul. She threatened her family with paralysis and a broken heart; to revive a little at the suggestion that there are ecclesiastical as well as legal Peers.

But finding that the proposed choice of profession did not contain common sense enough to admit an archdeacon upon the mental horizon, much less a bishop, that it was a call, a low dissenting call, just like young Syd Clarke's, the Postmaster's son, who got the County Court scholarship and scented himself with white rose, she collapsed completely, fell sick of a liver complaint, and went for a cure.

The Squire, a godless old man with some wit and more blasphemy, felt the blow as keenly as did his wife. Had it not carried her mercifully off to Germany for a spell, he too might have lost heart and weakly sickened.

For six generations every son of his lusty house had been soldier or sailor, and with but two of his own to make men of, this choice of George's was a heavy stroke. A parson on one's own hearth may, in certain conditions, prove but a destroying dispensation. Jasper felt outraged.

To keep himself from dwelling morbidly upon the subject, he drank harder that autumn and winter than he had been known to do since the year following George's birth, when he had first broken out. That memorable year when old Holt, the butler, young then, had gone out one morning to find Ralph Wynne, face downwards under a tree, a bullet in his heart, a shock that had turned madam silent in a day and put an end for good to her passion for magnificent entertaining.

With the horror of a somewhat compromising tragedy burnt into her soul, Mrs. Winnington permanently lost her taste for the flesh-pots of Egypt.

Throughout their childhood Ralph Wynne and Isabella

Cockburn had continually quarrelled for the sheer joy of making up again, and the moment they found out what loving meant, they had straightway adored each other.

In those early days it had been a discreet affection, hallowed by the smiles of two families. Isabella's portion was indeed slender, but her position was undeniable. In rank and prospects Wynne was also entirely desirable. An uncle, however, who should have died decently, scurvily married, and launched a superfluous heir upon an astonished world. Ralph was left with expensive tastes, a subaltern's pay, and a younger son's pittance.

Isabella had hot blood in her veins, and loved him in fierce and fervent gusts, but in her passion for income and standing there lurked a more coherent solidity. Moreover, she had always detested Rebecca Westcar, then engaged to big Jasper Winnington.

Even when her own affair had gone with a fine swing, Isabella had found it odious that this black-browed hoyden should have secured the best match in the countryside, a man whom the very night of her coming out she had, to the best of her belief, annexed as a personal asset.

To give her her due, Isabella waited for a quite reasonable time (always skilfully undermining Rebecca) in order to give Ralph the benefit of any stray doubt. But the moment his impossibility became absolute, she started operations upon Jasper in earnest. Her manœuvres were masterly, and were ably seconded by Rebecca's imperious temper and unchastened tongue. The lies and slanders of Isabella were indeed of an order to convince the foolishness of man, and set all his pride ablaze, and Rebecca, if the truth must be told, was in those days a spit-fire. And so, outraged and betrayed, as he thought, by Rebecca, in a boyish tempest of wounded vanity and chivalrous admiration, he married the other girl off-hand. For, maddened, poor fool, by the taunts of Rebecca and the deprecations of Isabella, he would brook no delay.

The Isabella of that period was of a constitution eminently adapted to make the best of both worlds. She felt quite equal, indeed, to managing both her husband and Ralph in an ordered and correct fashion; to running them in the same team, in short, yet without offence.

But love such as Ralph's could find no decent reaction ; it burnt out soul and sense.

To babble at Isabella's table, and go in and out at Jasper's side, drove him mad, and one dark night, after a despairing interview with Isabella, in which her conduct was monumental, his a disgrace, he took his foolish life at her very gates.

To suspect his wife had never struck Jasper, and he had liked Ralph Wynne as boy and man. Now the suicide and a hideous mass of post-mortem testimony, supplied by letters and candid friends, told him everything hitherto unknown. How he had been tricked, Rebecca wronged, and their lives spoilt.

But revenge still lay sweet at the bottom of the bitter cup, and Jasper hugged it tight.

In his first agony he turned and denounced his wife, but her horrible stony silence froze the words in his throat.

He turned away in impotent despair ; what can a man say to the glacial silence of a woman ?

But every deadly passion within Jasper was stung to a wild life. His nature was wried and wrung. The only cool thing left him was an indomitable brain, steadied and hardened to a crude maturity.

That of conventional guilt Isabella was wholly free, he was quite aware. "She knew better," he grimly commented, and stood staunchly by her before the world. It was her own awful silence that condemned her. But in private he had another game to play ; his silent acceptance of her criminality became soon as sinister a factor in their miserable lives as her silence of remorse.

In the intervals of his fiendish game Jasper drifted into hard drinking—Isabella into good works.

Jasper drank, not to efface himself ; no amount of spirituous liquor could blot out the squire, but alcohol threw a veil of humour and of mercy over his wife, jogged his inventive faculty, and suggested new and whimsical methods of bringing things home to her. Brought back, in short, some of the wild joy in living which her treachery had destroyed.

A full and unstinted delight in the powers his abominable habits let loose became in time an overwhelming tempta-

tion to Jasper, to which, it is needless to say, he yielded with a grace most *debonnair*.

Since then he had often been the centre of some wild scandal vigorous with the open air, and wicked with humour; but in this present outbreak there was the satanic insolence of that which had then alarmed and entranced the County. His achievements were indeed monumental, and underlying their unholy levity, there lay the ghastly coherence of a Monte Christo. The cup that destroys had no morose or enervating effect upon Jasper Winnington at any time, now it seemed diabolically to inspire him.

If, however, he hoped to bring his folly home to his son, as he had once in his agony broken Isabella his wife, by the subtle and invincible weapons of ridicule, or to lower George's pride in his high calling, he was vastly mistaken. George was neither prig nor prophet; he was a sorely tried, chafing boy, but through all hindrance he kept both his head and his dignity, and never budged from his place beside his father.

He loved his wonderful father—possibly with more faith and hope than common carnal affection—and fulfilled with zeal and sincerity all sweet and fresh, and full of living sap, could have removed mountains to save his father's soul. To be continually interrupted in his divinity studies in order to track that vagrant body upon its amazing enterprises, was certainly a trial, but George honestly faced it.

Even when Jasper stood up in smiling bulk to render account of himself before his peers at the Quarter Sessions, upon the occasion of the stringing up of a poacher on a high gate the better part of a frosty night, explaining the motives and ground-work of his action, till the Court howled with laughter, the very victim sniggering feebly on his bench, George sat by sturdily amidst the rollicking crowd.

And being a manly gentleman he even laughed with the rest at the volleys of thunderous wit. Such laughter could bring ridicule neither upon his resolve, nor his ideals. He knew well, moreover, that his presence there kept his father's wit from degenerating into license, and when he glanced at the giggling tinker, felt a comfortable convic-

tion that but for his timely intervention the wretch would now be food for worms.

When Jasper recovered from this particular bout, he threw no further gibes at the Church as a career for a man with his proper complement of blood, brain and sinew. But from thenceforth he was a little afraid of his son. And his son, being as yet new to grace, and fermenting with zeal, could discern no pathos in this untoward dread.

George's sisters, absorbed in looking out for establishments under the capable wings of their mother's relatives, yet found time to give him *their* views upon curates.

Miss Rebecca, being the godmother of George, a boon she had wrested at the point of the sword from Isabella, had destined him from his birth for the Army, and did not spare him in the matter of argument. George's choice of a profession, therefore, on the whole tried both the nerves of the young man and the foundations of his faith, but amongst many fleeting pains it brought him one everlasting joy.

An old and invincible grudge harboured by Colonel Westcar against Jasper Winnington, which he hoped one day to pay off, had been largely instrumental in attracting the former gentleman to Thryng, otherwise he would have let the house.

When a self-righteous prig of eighteen, the pride of his instructors and their despair, the Squire one baleful night had tried to make young Westcar "drink like a gentleman, sir," and the noble resistance of the heroic youth had fallen flat in the face of the wit of his wicked tempter.

There are some things no man can ever forgive. To the day of his death Colonel Westcar felt cold when he recalled the giggles that swamped his solemn testimony.

To see a son of his a drivelling parson would be gall and wormwood to this slayer of youthful virtue. Colonel Westcar, directly George's leanings became known, scented blood from afar, girded up his loins, and feeling that he had not waited in vain, at the first call to arms forsook his retirement and lurked round in the wake of the campaign, which the Squire took good care should be con-

ducted square in the eye of the public. So rapt and enthralled indeed grew the old soldier, that he broke one day the silence of years and set forth in fiery speech to Joan's awe-stricken ears, the details of the agreeable contest.

It was the first human occurrence he had ever intimately discussed with the girl, having hitherto confined himself to History, the moral cause and effect of woman, and the levity underlying modern warfare.

While during the stated portion of each day wherein his daughter was called upon to help him in his workshop, where he laboured without ceasing to undermine the inventions of his enemies, Colonel Westcar sometimes launched forth upon the staying capacity inherent in a cog.

But that an eminently unscientific young man of peace should have succeeded in storming an intelligence so remote from ordinary things, had made George, from the very start, a dominant and imposing figure in the eyes of innocent Joan.

The behaviour of the young aspirant for spiritual honours, moreover, throughout the conflict, militarism tempered with scholarship, really did appeal even to the vengeful Colonel, wherefore he grew a little human when he spoke of George.

When the first shock of awe had worn off, and she beheld George eating at her very own table, Joan might possibly have discerned him as man, had he not squared up to her father upon four different occasions, each time got the better of him, yet left them both smiling.

With effect so startling, what but reverence was possible to the crushed coerced mind of so young a damsel? And so the fear in regard to all men wherewith her father had filled Joan gave way gradually to a sweet reverence for one.

Having first given wings to her imagination, George now set it off thrilling artlessly about holy things.

But his early training in the ways of men protected him from many of the antics of curates. Lest he should fall into mawkishness, quite unconsciously he grew into a half-shy, wholly fearless boy, and in his touch there was cleansing.

He reminded Joan of Christ amidst the elders; to couple him with love or silliness would, to her simple mind, have been blasphemy most vulgar and rank, and yet being a boy kept him easy, the air sunny and fresh.

Joan learnt to breathe, and hope, and believe, and to do beautifully all that she did. She was making ready to think even, when one morning George woke up a man, to know that he loved her.

It was a blow to George. He yearned always for the intellectual grasp of St. Paul, and in his time had suffered promptings of celibacy.

He was in a sore dilemma; and yet had too much work on his hands to wrap himself up in his own affairs and emotions. His holiday was still a month off and here was love staring him imperiously in the face.

George was quite human; he had already met and hob-nobbed with love. But what Love! a shadow in the twilight that must inevitably have melted in his grasp. It had nothing to do with the force that now moved him. This fire that warmed him was fire from Heaven. In the spirit that inspired him was there the spirit of the Lord of Hosts.

He plunged into his clothes and went swiftly to Church, and in the next half-hour no man ever strove harder than George to fix his heart and eyes upon God, but he was four-and-twenty, and they both ran off to Joan, sweet white little Joan; her undisturbed eyes turned gently to his shocked ones.

Beaten at one breach, in his straight way, George marched up to another. The lambent mystery behind those chesnut eyes was of God's making, and for his help. He would call upon it. So he looked down at her frankly, his face full of a great demand, and Joan, her thoughts from some hurt in George's face, circling round the Christ boy puzzled by an Elder's subtlety, not knowing what she did, or why she did it, smiled up at the appeal.

The prayers lost nothing by the unseemly meeting of those honest young eyes, for George's heart was singing praises to God in that He had made Joan, and Joan was glad to be alive that she might follow in George's steps to Church.

George went home to think it all out, and forgetting

his breakfast ; celibacy, a vegetable diet and the apostle Paul, came down upon him like a damp vapour. Shaking himself he went out amongst his people and came home through the woods, and tried by the ordeal of the hearts of men, the soul of the woods and the waters, the sun and air, the earth and all things above and below it. Joan stood the test.

She was fresh from God's hands ; George saw that she was good. St. Paul and celibacy fled screaming ; a vegetable diet suggested deadly sins. Joan and deadly sins ! George swept the suggestion from his mind and ate an enormous dinner.

But he kept all these things in his heart, borrowed faith from Joan's eyes which begat faith in himself ; from faith came strength, and from strength sweetness.

As for Joan, her love and all things good and gracious advanced in bounds, and they all seemed to be narrowed into the compass of the little pink granite Church upon Ripley Rise.

Meanwhile Colonel Westcar had not been napping. From the beginning of the acquaintance he had recognised the possibility of the result. Given a mother such as Joan's he had at least absoluteness to reckon with. He looked upon the whole sacerdotal tribe indeed as feminine, but there was a certain sense of security attached to an alliance with it.

If Joan were married, at an early age, to a curate, she would be extremely unlikely, at any age, to be dancing with cavalry men, whilst the marriage would be poisonously distasteful to Jasper Winnington.

Although hating society, in order to harry an enemy, or clip the wings of vanity, Colonel Westcar could yet make sacrifices upon its altar. He told Joan it was full time she began to return calls. He bought her an abominable brown frock, told her to put her hair up, and Mrs. Winnington having lately left her tri-yearly tribute of cards at his gloomy house, whisked her up to the Hall.

Joan was too sweet and quiet a little lady to be clumsy under the fearless stare of smartness, but she wondered as she drank her tea what miracle had brought forth George from such a household, and prayed mutely that

the squire might not be moved to sit very close to her.

"She hasn't a point one can hang on to," said Beatrice yawning, as soon as the door had closed upon Joan. "Awfully good of George to look after her."

"Yes," murmured Cora.

"Full to the brim of Church decorations—altar shining in every inch of her. Even a curate couldn't stand that, he'd want some change of diet, and George after all was once a man."

Thus they dismissed Joan.

Colonel Westcar, however, was satisfied.

He had now brought out Joan sufficiently for all practical purposes. No one could accuse him of having kept the girl up his sleeve in order to entrap the Church. Nature would do the rest.

When weeks went on, however, and silence still reigned, it struck this wise and fond father that too heavenly a love may eventually lose sight altogether of marriage.

He knew himself to be suffering from a fatal complaint, and was anxious before he died to see the Squire confounded. So one day he put a light to the mine. And late in the falling twilight there leapt from George's heart wonderful words; into Joan's eyes a wonderful light; and they set forth together, George's eyes upon Heaven, Joan's upon George's.

And now the holes in the Vicarage roof were being filled up, and the two were to be married in a month.

But Colonel Westcar had died, his revenge still uncompleted.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS REBECCA's past held no illusions, and could be summed up in a few simple words. "Only for the devilish lies of one woman, and the devilish temper of another, I'd be up there now," she reflected, with sombre eyes, as they left the marshes and the heath beyond, and turned round by the boundaries of Thryng. "And with me there, catch Jasper blaspheming round the country like an ill-conditioned

lunatic ; wasting good breath, good intellect, and a heart of gold, poor fool. H'd be at Westminster hectoring into coherence that silly crew of wobblers now misruling the land."

"Joan, how much do you know of your now imminent people-in-law?" she demanded, with startling distinctness.

Joan started.

"Hardly anything."

"Define that."

"I've called three times since I—I—wore long dresses, and they've called four."

"Well?"

"The first two visits they yawned chiefly," said Joan, with some hesitation. "The third they answered all their own questions. But since I've heard them talk more, I can understand how dull I must seem to them."

"It will be better, perhaps," said Miss Rebecca virtuously, "that you should hear of your future connections from a friend."

"Yes," said Joan, meekly.

"As for dullness, they were as dull at eighteen as you ; dullness is the privilege of extreme youth. Even now they're as shallow as duck-ponds. Indeed, there's something of the duck-pond, to my mind, in all modern smartness, the phosphorus of the swamp, a suggestion of malaria about it, so frequently is it a harbinger of decay—the last throw of the *passée*."

She paused, with a kindlier tolerance, and sighed.

"After all, it's in the divine order, perhaps. Look at the heroic efforts of Nature to beautify decay, and smartness, I'll not deny, is useful in settling girls whom youth has left stranded. The lamp of your wise virgin throws, I fear, too pale and chaste a gleam for young men dazzled with electric light and the garishness of the new life. Nowadays they like a suggestion of brimstone, even about their virgins. At the same time," she wandered on, harking back to her own centre of thought, "smartness won't teach a girl to know a man when she sees one. Cora is hovering on the verge of a scabbard with a tailor's sword inside it, and calls the construction a soldier, while Beatrice is engaged to a jockey with half-moon legs. Had these girls cultivated the acquaintance of their father it would have

given them a glimpse into the things that go to the making of men."

"But—but——"

Miss Rebecca's chin was in the air. "My dear child, you remind me of the 'Maiden's Prayer.' A vicarage hen," she reflected under her breath, "with an inherited taste for olives. But, dear me! You're quite right. There's nothing you have heard that isn't true: Jasper Winnington drinks with shameless persistence; he makes hay of the proprieties; he outrages his wife, and annoys his children. He is the despair of the Church and the perennial delight of old maids' tea-parties."

"But——"

"I can 'but,' too, my girl," said Miss Rebecca, with dignity, "and I defy anyone to say that Jasper Winnington has ever made a beast of himself in his cups or has ever maundered. He drinks, at least, like a man."

Miss Rebecca reared herself up like a cask on end, and snorted audibly. Joan was horribly impressed. Her conscience smote her, but her eyes flashed. The hot breath of battle was in her face, and there was a spice of the South wind in it.

And though a challenge had been thrown down on behalf of the piggish sin of drunkenness, there yet lurked justice in the glove.

The faint disgust wherewith, up to this moment, the shouting notoriety of George's father had infected Joan, yielded all at once to a sense of excited interest.

Miss Rebecca felt satisfied. "Nor is there a trace of the slimy reptile in this—old reprobate," she resumed. "Nor yet the down-at-heels sloven. Jasper is clean, body and mind. There is nothing in him," she said proudly, "to hurt a girl."

"Oh!" said Joan. In her state of mental confusion hardly an unnatural remark, as both reason and conscience assured Miss Rebecca, but what in the name of goodness had either reason or conscience to do with Jasper? She flushed wrathfully, but bit down upon direct rebuke.

"Jasper Winnington," she explained haughtily, "is no injured lamb, but he's not a wolf in sheep's clothing, at least. Thank God for that," she muttered. "If either of those young women had had the sense to tackle the man,

she could have wound him round her finger—I see doubt in your heart and George in your eyes, Joan. George couldn't do it; sons are clumsy and conventional creatures in the face of their father's sins, and George is tarred with the clerical tar-brush. He can't look at his father without thinking of conversion. Jasper, poor soul, and conversion are miles apart. I don't blame George for his yearnings, but it puts him out of the running. Moreover, I understand and appreciate George's attitude in the matter. It's a conflict between spirit and good taste; spirit urging him to action; good taste suggesting that he may be about to take an unwarrantable liberty. There's a certain indecency in a son, ordained or not, hankering to convert his father, but a girl can slip into a lonely heart and work there."

"Lonely?" said Joan sharply, out of the silence. Lonely and languishing under the disapproval of George! The sin shrank before its punishment, a pink wave of sympathy rose to her cheeks; there were tears at the bottom of her chestnut eyes.

"Lonely? Yes, lonely. And why not, pray? Stringing up poachers, sousing yourself in whisky, and scandalising the County, won't prevent a man's carrying an empty heart in his body."

Of a sudden Miss Rebecca rose in her seat, and craned her head so as to look firmly at a clump of bright-leaved beeches, with one tall oak to the right of them. "The tree," she muttered, "the tree, where Ralph lay dead—and to see it every time she goes in and out. God help the woman!" She dropped back, silent and a little grey.

Joan saw neither the movement nor the old woman's face. She was making up her mind hard, and when at last she spoke her eyes winced away from Miss Rebecca's, and fell upon her clasped hands.

"George's brother—and—and the little boy?" she faltered.

"Ah! ah!" It was a little odd, hunted cry. "So you've heard it, then?" said Rebecca, her hands falling idle on the knitting. "Dick is a good lad," she began, in a patient tired voice, "with his mother's pride and horror of public betrayal. He has always kept himself well out of the way. He's in a Hussar regiment, as you know, and has exchanged three times to avoid England and his home. And, and—

he who used to be a fiery boy is now a grave, cold man. His wife, a nice little unoriginal goose, has caught his tone and carefully feminised it. They never came to the house till the child was eight, and from the moment Mrs. Dick entered it she was a hen with outstretched wings protecting the boy from a hawk." Miss Rebecca paused, and moved uneasily. "She did it badly—she cackled. Jasper Winnington was fairly beside himself during the visit, and one night, the mother's back turned, he made the poor white weakling half drunk with champagne. She found him capering amongst the glasses—howling——"

"Oh! Stop——!"

Miss Westcar coughed hoarsely.

"I said just now that Jasper Winnington had never made a beast of himself; I'll retract that. He did then. That night he sank lower than any beast.

"It's an awful thing," she resumed presently, "when a man takes it into his own hands to do justice upon the mother of his children. It's an awful thing to see the pride of a proud woman brought low. She hasn't given a dinner-party, poor creature, since just after George's birth.

"She married mainly to make the County stare. It's stared for twenty years, but hardly in the way she proposed that it should stare. In my time," said Miss Rebecca, with a queer break in her voice, "I've cried for Isabella Winnington. Give you my word I have," she repeated vehemently, "but now that she whimpers"—she threw up her white head—"I'm blest if I can. You may bring human nature to a dish of hyssop, but you can't make it drink. I never see Isabella Winnington but I thank God that in Heaven there are many mansions. Hullo! There's George on the prowl. Thank God you've had the luck to find a *man*—in spite of many things—and that you haven't the temper of seven devils yourself. There, child! Jump out. For your sake I'll try to behave decently to your mother-in-law."

CHAPTER V.

MRS. WINNINGTON was gazing with weary eyes through the deep-set wide windows of her drawing-room at a Nature she frankly detested, when, with a precipitancy singularly unlike her habitual rôle of imperial deliberation, she rose to her feet. "Beatrice! Cora!" she cried, "Isn't that the Purley carriage?"

Cora huddled back in her chair feebly; Beatrice plunged to the window, and, with a little shriek of delight and the agility of a professional, calmly performed the high kick.

"Beatrice!" wailed her mother, "if only you would have a little consideration for me, and disgrace yourself in your own bed-room, if you must do so. That insufferable woman, with the manners and customs of the stable yard! I wish you'd both been out. Her language isn't fit for girls."

"Keep your hair on, mother, dear. We're not eighteen, like Joan. As for language——"

"You can restrain yourself on occasion, Beatrice. She is incapable in any condition of restraint. Assafoetida and the stable! Cora, give me my smelling bottle."

"Cora looks bashed. Here you are. Pah! I'd rather smell Miss Rebecca."

Beatrice ran a superb physique for all it was worth, and steered clear of scented sins. "Besides," said she, "you can't sniff at stables and at the same time be engaged to a pair of legs like Billy's."

"Billy——"

"Has four thousand a year," said Bee, with a blithe laugh, "and he firmly believes I'm twenty-three; that

makes you twenty-one, Cora. You ought to appreciate Billy more keenly than you do."

"And with the Peerage and women in his house!" murmured Cora. "Billy is odd, certainly, but he has all his wits about him surely?"

"Billy's a sportsman, you see," sweetly rejoined Beatrice, "not a toy soldier; he doesn't go poking a collapsible little sword into the chronological flights of women."

Cora flushed delicately. The Honourable Henry Gervase, as was well known, had not disdained to profit by the researches of a feminine friend, and to smile palely at the innocent anachronisms of his betrothed. Hence Cora's melancholy acceptance of the penalties of a name.

Beatrice was now frankly smoothing out a wrinkle, before a mirror.

"Being Lower Middle has screaming advantages," she said good-naturedly, but with a sigh.

Cora, still faintly pink, bit her small lips. She was a frail, fearful little thing, of those who fade young. The mere thought of age made her teeth want to chatter.

"Miss Rebecca, even in the distance, makes me shiver," she murmured with apologetic mendacity.

"So it would me," laughed Beatrice, "if there was anyone about. She's so fiendishly accurate as to dates, and will go stumping back to pre-natal periods. Buck up, Cora, the men won't be back these three hours."

"She'll be certain to do something outrageous," said Mrs. Winnington, with stony eyes, "and before the servants."

"Take her easy, mother—jolly old recruiting sergeant! If she'd wear a bunch of ribbons on her bonnet and twirl her moustaches she'd be perfect."

"Not one redeeming point," wailed the sad mother, passing a delicately-powdered handkerchief over her stately nose. "Every acre she has is entailed, otherwise that girl——" Her eyes fell upon Beatrice's jovial grin. "There's vulgarity in the woman's very atmosphere," she cried. "You become impossible at her approach, Beatrice. Thank God, marriage may save you."

"Marriage with Billy! Dear me!—What's keeping the old woman?"

"Beatrice!—My dear Rebecca, this is delightful, and so unexpected."

"Sorry to startle you, but since Joan's a kinswoman—I thought I'd better come to pay my respects upon the—humph—interesting occasion—to congratulate or condole as the case may be." With discomposing agility she swung round upon the girls. "You didn't expect George to make a fool of himself quite so young," she demanded, "and if he did, you'd have been glad if he'd shown more of the wisdom of the serpent in his folly, eh, girls?"

"Oh! we've long given up hoping for accountable behaviour so far as George is concerned," said Beatrice, with cheerful defiance.

"My dear Rebecca!" Isabella interposed hastily, "do sit down." Rebecca turned and paused, and for one instant the old enemies, rigid and cold with memory, stood facing one another.

They were both erect, unbending, big women, but there the resemblance ceased.

In the days of her glory Mrs. Winnington had been beautiful in an imperial style, and through her desolation she clung hard both to frame and feature. There was pathos in the hard long lines of the lonely waist, the padded breast, the cold unyielding shoulders, that could never have crouched amongst children. But it was all wonderfully fine and majestic; a palatial scaffolding from which an artist suggested all things. Mrs. Winnington was thankful to have saved so much from a wreck so mighty, and in the sombre magnificence of her apparel there was a hint of a Phoenix arising from the ashes.

Miss Rebecca, on the contrary, let the years work their will upon her. She could discern no indecency, in fact and accentuated the meagreness of a knot of grised hair, half-way up her head, by generous bulwarks of ancient tortoise-shell.

She wore the best corded silk, well off the ground; a small white tucker about her neck, and an iron-grey moustache; an untoward adornment that afflicted her friends and gave an handle unto her enemies, but she had long accepted it with a proud humility.

In her hours of hard despair it was a visible and abiding

monument to the death of Hope. In softer intervals, an irrefragable protest against feminine duplicity.

Miss Rebecca's sack-like vastness caused a stirring of warmth in the frozen veins of her slim supplanter.—This the black-eyed toast of four Counties? This?

Isabella had indeed prevailed. Her enemy had become as naught before her.

"Sit down, Rebecca," she said again, a note of solemn joy in her spent voice.

Miss Rebecca thumped down upon a chair.

"Don't let me disturb you, girls," she boomed. "I know I've broken into a conversation."

"Oh! well!" said Mrs. Winnington sweetly, "with marriage bells in the air, it's natural——"

"To be braying fools in their folly. It certainly is. I've been at it myself these two days. I'm very angry with Joan, plunging into the depths before she's learnt to swim."

"Ah! I know marriage is a subject you object to discussing."

"I object! You're entirely mistaken; I'm no faddist, and believe in the free discussion of everything. Marriage to my mind is a dispensation, not unlike vaccination; in preserving those who experiment in it from certain gross and definite dangers, it may land them in others less obvious, perhaps, but far more subtle. Because I have not chosen to provide data for the thing, and so put myself at the mercy of the reckless speculation of fools, is no reason that others should not do so."—She paused to fling a pellet of benevolence at the young people.—"I can only hope for your sakes, girls, that the practice of the state may be less dull than all the theories in regard to it I have so far come across."

"You've been so kind to little Joan," cooed Isabella, "I can't think what she'd have done without you."

All the way up the drive Miss Rebecca had been striving mightily after meekness; an exercise so abhorrent that in order to lighten the strain she had been totting up the sins of Isabella, together with the excuses possible for an honest mind to make for Jasper. The complications resulting had been making hay of her temper. Now the suffering-saint expression overspreading Isabella's

eagle, bedaubed nose was the last straw. Forbearance strolled off smiling. Miss Rebecca humped her back like a cat.

"She managed to do without me for upwards of eighteen years," she snapped.

"That wasn't your fault."

"In family squabbles the blame doesn't usually rest with one side."

Beatrice chuckled softly in her chair.

Resolved to oppose to the grossness of brute force the sublime restraint of *noblesse oblige*, Mrs. Winnington gently sighed.

"You're so frank and honest, Rebecca," she purred.

"It's no use to try to mince matters, George's marriage *has* been rather a shock; he's so young, dear fellow, so unpractical, and dear little Joan——"

"Has neither position, features, nor a stiver," affably observed Miss Rebecca. "I quite understand, Isabella; it's been a facer."

"The old lady's too much for mother," reflected Bee, rising slowly from her comfortable lounge, "and being engaged to Billy makes you glad of any splutter—any stir in a dull pool is a boon."

"So far as I can see," she said lazily, her hand gracefully enough posed on her hip, "instead of weeping and gnashing our teeth, we ought to be thanking our stars that George is comparatively safe, and won't be disgracing us in some weird way——"

"Beatrice!"

"You never know," she pursued unmoved, "what George would be at next. Rabid Spirituality will drive a man to anything. He might have married a Bruised Reed—a social reformer—the brand plucked from the burning business—anything."

Miss Rebecca glanced at the girl. Had her eyes not been as hard as flints they'd have been Jasper's, and you could see him in her wide and comely shoulders. Miss Westcar paused a moment to peer closer. Her mother's selfishness lurked like fiends in those sunny dimples. Miss Rebecca's eyes, which had strangely melted, jerked away from the girl.

She was better, however, than the mawkish mother,

and after a conscientious study of Jasper's womenkind one could feel more gently towards Jasper.

"Well, Beatrice, pray continue," she commanded.

"Well, you see, George's temptations are so varied and extraordinary, and being man as well as curate, and having no need to hitch himself up by a woman's petticoats, he'd be certain to be attracted by beauty under a cloud. George has given us a lot of anxiety. It's quite pleasant to be able to breathe again."

"My dear Beatrice——"

"But, mother, you know how we've suffered. Last year, for example, that rescued widow——"

"Oh! Bee!" bleated Cora.

"Who gave gin-parties," said Miss Rebecca, encouragingly.

"But she profited by her knowledge of man. She fed George. The one he picked up fainting at the Docks was both respectable and sincerely religious, remember her hymns, Cora? but she gave George ptomaine poisoning with a pie made out of a block ornament. She had a sense of humour you'd never have expected of her. You see, she'd been saving up two-thirds of the weekly allowance to send to the Distressed Curates' Fund. As for District Visitors, with snub noses and relatives, they'd spring up in a desert with a curate within scent. On the whole, Miss Rebecca," concluded Bee, "I think you'd better congratulate us, not condole with us."

"My dear girl," cried her mother, "that's neither a pretty nor—ahem—quite a fair way of putting things."

"Pray don't distress yourself, Isabella. I don't dislike Beatrice's methods of being rude. They're to the point."

With the courage born of fear, Cora flung herself into the breach.

"But you're so just and quick at seeing things, dear Miss Rebecca, you can understand our relief. It's not as though we'd no stake in the Parish and George were at some distance. Now he's coming so close it would be dreadful if—if he were to play fast and loose with a family living. So Joan being so exactly right will make us feel ever so much more comfortable; she really will."

Miss Rebecca's round eyes goggled. "My dear young

lady, pray don't apologise for your resignation in accepting with meekness the undeserved cross of my young kinswoman. Your unflinching fortitude in the matter does you the highest honour."

Beatrice grinned complacently in her sister's face. The door opened, and a gigantic footman tip-toed across the room, a flimsy parcel laid delicately across his great arms. The coming of Matthew was at the same moment a relief and a bomb-shell.

In a flash, Miss Rebecca had risen to her legs. "Isabella," said she, swift and decisive, "will you permit me to speak to Matthew Jones? He belongs to Purley."

By Purley Miss Rebecca meant ME.

"Certainly, Rebecca," said Mrs. Winnington faintly.

"So, Matthew Jones," said Miss Rebecca, "you're here then in domestic service?" She shot up her tortoise-shell-handled glasses, and carefully inspected the man. "A great over-fed house-rabbit," she murmured, absently, "with the makings of a soldier in him. And the letter I got from you, from Kinglake Barracks, Matthew Jones? What about that?"

"I—I Ma'am——"

"You lied; yes. And the money for incidental expenses? And the letter to the Colonel?—I've been wondering at getting no reply—Didn't I put you through your drill-book till you could say it backward? Speak up, man!"

"Yes'm."

"Didn't I dose you into hard condition till your own mother wouldn't know you. What?"

"Yes'm."

"Has the man no sense of shame? Why you were the decentist—hum—proposed recruit in *looks*—thanks to the trouble I took with you—we've sent up these five years, and Purley noted through the County for well-set-up men. Miss Rebecca glanced vindictively at a pug derisively regarding the scene. "And now I find you nurse-maiding a lap-dog. But if you forget your duty, Matthew Jones, I don't forget mine. You'll be fighting for your Queen and England's glory yet or my name isn't Rebecca Westcar. Meanwhile, take the bottle I'll send you, and don't forget your physical exercises. Never till this

moment have I ever blushed for Purley. I'll explain this matter to your mistress. Go."

"I must apologise, Isabella," she resumed when the man had vanished, "for what may strike you as unwarrantable interference, but I daresay you didn't know that the fellow belongs root and branch to Purley. I can say without vain-glory that I saved his life as a child—croup, that penalty of lusty infants—and, seeing what possibilities his shoulders promised, I kept my eye on him. I never gave the boy a dose, but I had his Country in view. Size, physique, everything, and the authorities thanking you for miserable five-foot-fives! I don't want to do anything underhand, Isabella, but we must arrange this matter."

Knowing that whoso openly entered the lists against Miss Rebecca when her overmastering passion took the field must inevitably emerge stripped of every rag of dignity, Mrs. Winnington during this trying scene had maintained a proud silence. Now with calm magnificence she demanded what dear Rebecca proposed to do, while Beatrice broke in with pleased excitement, "Dear me! Matthew a soldier! But has he any courage?"

"Courage! Not the courage of a week-old calf. That's a detail. He'll acquire the courage of custom, shame, and imitation after a bit. Isabella, we must put this through. For everybody's sake the Army should absorb that mass of undisciplined brute force—a potential besom of iniquity—and riddle it into coherent power. You're going to be a soldier's wife, Cora, I wonder you can stand the sight of wasted bulk like that littering the premises. Isabella, if you let me have Matthew before he's too far gone, I'll see you don't suffer. Is he much of a servant?"

"Now, mother, there's a sporting offer for you," counselled Beatrice promptly. "Take it; Matthew's a lout."

"I can't say that he's very efficient," admitted her mother.

"Come now," said Miss Rebecca softening, "that's fair and satisfactory. Just what you'd expect. A bull in a china shop. I can do better for you than that. Plenty of medical unfits for purposes of house decoration and the County." She pondered, frowning, to consult her tablets. "I have now on my hands a six-foot-two thing

who's been straining his heart at blacksmithing. Good-looking, but bloated; great flabby calves, will grow stable with good food. Heart not weak enough to interfere with house-work. A nice mild manner; very thing for a footman, I'll send him over to-morrow."

Miss Rebecca, forgetting her tablets, whipped out her handkerchief and thoughtfully tied a knot in it.

Mrs. Winnington smiled faintly. "And we thought the Feudal System an exploded dream," said she.

"That's just as one likes to make it. Catch it being an exploded dream—civilised, of course, and tempered to a reformed Christianity, so long as I have a breath in my body, or an acre to my name, I'll have no under-paid clerks or emasculated flunkies in my village, except, of course, Nature chooses to exempt them from their duty. Now let us get back to clerical affairs."

"But," pleaded poor Isabella in dismay, "let us first ask Beatrice what her parcel contains."

"Clerical affairs," said Beatrice promptly. "You're all giving Joan things to make her house decent, but I found out that she's lived eighteen years in this vale of tears without one lace petticoat, so I got her two, and one silk, opal-tinted; see!—she can wear it with anything. One has to consider the servants."

"Oh! Bee! How thoughtful you are," cried Cora, who really admired the broader point of view of her sister.

"It was sweet of you, Beatrice," said her mother. "But dear little Joan is so quiet in her dress, one doesn't associate her with that sort of thing."

"Servants will. They expect the decencies of civilisation from visitors, vicars' wives or not. These will carry her over a year. Afterwards she can assume the privileges of her kind. The Church is as good, I suppose, as any other cloak of charity. Meantime I thought I'd be on the safe side and choose the petticoats myself." She flicked up the lace flounces and wickedly laughed in Miss Rebecca's flaming face.

"She has her father's taste for audacity seemingly," thought that lady, with unwilling appreciation.

"I can't follow you, Beatrice," she remarked calmly. "Your subtleties are beyond me."

"Such a comfort,"-nervously threw in Mrs. Winnington, "that little Joan and George are so entirely of one mind in all things. My one fear is lest Joan's fervent religious feeling may accentuate dear George's unpracticality. George's tastes," she sighed, "leave unfortunately no margin in his cheque-book for further eccentricities."

"And since she's never tasted any flesh-pots," mused Beatrice, "she can't very well be hankering after them."

Miss Rebecca was preserving an observant silence, but her face jerked Cora's attitude of mute deprecation into unwise words.

"How angelic to be above that sort of thing—amusing yourself, you know, and frocks," she murmured.

"Ripping," admitted Beatrice cordially. "Especially about quarter-day."

"Yes," said Mrs. Winnington, with an anxious glance at the brooding Rebecca. "Thank God, Joan is simply cut out for a clergyman's wife."

Miss Rebecca smoothed her twitching moustache thoughtfully.

"She chose my best Chambertin yesterday at luncheon," she observed, "in preference to a fruity wholesome Port I keep for curates—not George, of course."

Beatrice softly whistled.

"I really can't see, Rebecca," said Mrs. Winnington, "why!"

"Beatrice can."

"It isn't after all," said Cora, in her inconsequent way, "as though Joan were a great beauty or——"

"Joan's a pencil sketch at present," said Miss Rebecca, "what she will be none of us knows, until character has filled her in."

"Sweet, gentle, unambitious. I am abundantly satisfied," protested Mrs. Winnington.

"A good deal of ambition may go with a decent enough temper," commented her adversary. "We're none of us in a position to judge of Joan as the wife of a vicar devoured with holy zeal. George's goings-on make me sick, but he's faithful and single-minded to his finger-tips. He has that true and unfailing devotion to a lofty aim which makes for greatness, which *is* greatness," she said, her eyes and voice full of sincere feeling. "However far

he may fall short of wordly wisdom. George will be a force in the land."

Mrs. Winnington was after all the mother of George ; she flushed with a sweet pleasure she had not known these many years, and Beatrice's eyes shot out friendliness, but Cora only wished petulantly that tea would come and relieve them of the odious woman.

"I don't want either side to be hampered by an undeserved martyrdom," pursued Miss Rebecca in absent-minded jerks. "A vicar's wife with one brace of petticoats, and those her first," she nicked her head at the foam of white against Beatrice's sea-green blouse. "You don't know what you may be doing, Beatrice ; you may be laying the seeds of a taste for Nottingham lace in Joan,"—"I'll get out some of *my* lace for the other petticoats," she mentally decided, "and confound their impudence."—"and revolutionising plans and prophecies. I was capable myself at eighteen of being an impassioned vicar's wife—for a month or so."

Beatrice chuckled.

"Weren't *you*?" demanded Miss Rebecca.

"Well, no."

"I think too well of you to believe it. You were as capable of a flutter of purblind devotion as any other young fool. Why, Cora there!" she wagged her head at that vision of languid protest, "at seventeen wanted to go out to India to harry honest men's harems, and look at her now. With such object lessons to teach us wisdom, which of us can prophesy of Joan? George has no business to go shelving a girl before she's looked round her. It's like a man's filling up a girl's programme a week before the ball. When I gave dances, if any one ventured to play that scurvy trick I took the liberty of drawing my pencil through his entries."

Here an onimous silence fell upon the circle. Miss Rebecca looked up to see Mrs. Winnington, with the look of one who has borne so much that now she feels ready for anything, gazing prayerfully at her clasped hands.

A stubborn look of sulk was spoiling the frank audacity of Beatrice's handsome face, and Cora on the sofa looked like a broken flower.

Miss Rebecca's eyes flashed past them all to see Jasper,

George, and Joan coming rapidly across the terrace. With a prick of despair she sat back solidly in her chair. "Two women to contend against and one tragic cat," she mused, "a saint, and your own vile propensities. Ah! Jasper, Jasper! it's only God Himself who can help you!"

CHAPTER VI.

It was after a hallowed and unforgettable hour with Joan that the Squire first hove in sight, and George's thrilling face fell dull as lead.

From his father's stride there was no prophesying anything in regard to this wonderful man's condition. Two steps to the left and he could keep the beautiful moment fair and fresh for ever. It was theirs—their own, his and Joan's. It was defrauding no one—if they went quickly and unperceived. Without a moment's hesitation George struck out for the leafy lane.

"It's quicker, if anything, to go home by the fir grove," he muttered, without a blush.

Her habit of prompt obedience turned Joan's face also, but conscience hung hard upon her heels.

She was frankly afraid of George's father. When she prayed for him, invariably she shivered, but his condition deeply moved her.

To be lonely with wife and children warm about you! To be disapproved of by George!

The shadow upon George's face certainly brought avalanches of his father's strange explosive iniquities clattering down upon Joan; but with another shy glance came a sweet wave of sympathy.

The sins paled before their punishment. If George said absolutely nothing, his effect, even then, was very much like that of Church, saving that Church made you remember your sins, whilst George made you forget them.

To make it possible for so vast a sinner as that magnificent figure upon the horizon to forget his unutterable sins—even for ten minutes—to snatch one little spell of ease

from an everlasting ache—simply by the application of George, was surely worth any sacrifice of self. A blurred vision of Dives thirsting fierily for a drop of cold water, flitted through the sweet changes of Joan's eyes. She halted shyly upon one leg.

"George," she faltered, "couldn't we catch your father? See, he's just turned back up the hill."

George looked frankly dumbfounded. But although he failed to fathom the meaning in her puzzling eyes, in a way he had lately fallen into, still staring, he answered blindly to their demand.

"I wanted you to myself, horribly," he grumbled smiling. "However——! I say, did you ever see such a stride?"

"No," she panted. "I, I'm glad he's just like that."

Jasper seemed somewhat startled at sight of the pursuing pair. As he halted he slightly gasped.

"Hullo! George, by Jove, and the little bride! Been round to look at your drawing-room?" "Odd choice for George," he thought rapidly, squinting at her across his son. "Deuce take it, why didn't I go back by the paddock? Better have that vault under the Chancel seen to, George," he hurriedly observed. "Smells clammy. Pity our ancestors hadn't some consideration for those that came after 'em. Now you'll be filling the old place with all the old wom—the ahem—the Church people of the county side, you must see they're not wiped out with typhoid."

"Yes, sir. But Morris says it's the farm drain that smells, not the vaults."

"Oh! Afraid of interfering with the altar. That's the game, is it? Have it your own way, then, but remember I warned you."

Hereupon the conversation seemed to languish.

The effect of George was less uplifting than Joan had hoped, and George himself did not seem happy.

Jasper looked down at the slight figure beside him taking two steps to his one, and carefully shortened his stride.

"Poor little weed," he sighed, "I hope she won't be bringing a race of pigmies into a fine family."

"Nice weather," he remarked, involuntarily lowering his tone. Being with the pair of them made him feel somehow as though he were in a sick room. "And to be living from

now on," he reflected, restively, "under the very shadow of the Church feminine! Bad enough, surely, to be raked spiritually from stem to stern by a son of your own."

He felt a distressing certainty that George, "from the look of the fellow," knew perfectly well all about certain late events which he'd have been glad enough now had never taken place.

He glanced again at George's remarkable choice and went on with the weather.

That squeezed to the last drop, he showed Joan the point from whence once or twice within the memory of man, the sea had been reported as distinctly visible, but there was a strain in the situation.

"You've been looking up the Holmes's, sir," said George suddenly.

"Yes," said Jasper, with some precipitation, "most amiable family, stock, lock and barrel, all taking a keen and intelligent interest in one another's complaints, and so far as I can gather, in nothing else. Now," reflected Jasper nervously, "he'll be thinking I helped the poor devils by way of a penance. The cloven hoof will out in George, and 'pon my soul I'm hanged if 'twas that altogether—not but what one does feel like it—after a bad turn," he sighed.

To the blank astonishment of both men, Joan fetched up short, with an excited little jump.

"But was it of you they were speaking," she cried, "they were so excited, and—sobbing, you know—and George seemed to be calming them down, I thought—I really thought they meant God, and I felt dreadfully in the way. But now—now I wish I had listened properly."

George laughed.

"I thought you were listening properly, else I'd have explained."

"Well, you see, it felt rather like listening at the door, so I thought I'd better think of something else, but, at least, I heard something."

She sidled nearer to the stately sinner, and struck out so eagerly that he had no longer to consider her weakness. Her short steps marched boldly with his long ones.

To be actively proud of George's father was a sensation so novel and exhilarating, that Joan felt quite equal to flying.

"Good Lord," thought the embarrassed man, "what's up now. Will this whey-faced chit be wanting to whitewash me next? 'This is what comes of letting the Church in on your chimney corner."

"What are you at with those stables, George?" Joan's ecstasy weakened; she caught her breath.

"We're so awfully short of room, sir, just yet, for schools and things, I thought we'd utilize those loose boxes, until we can look round us."

"Where are the horses to go, then? You'll want two."

"I can manage the Parish all right on my bicycle, I find."

Jasper ground his stick hard into a mole hill. The veins on his shapely hands stood out like cords. The devilish bane of a family living buzzed in his brain.

"Bicycle!" he hissed. "Didn't know you put hunting amongst the offences."

"I don't, but I can't see where the time for it comes in."

"You don't propose to be stumping the country all day and every day of the week, do you? Even bishops—so I'm told, take Monday. And look at 'em at shooting-parties, sitting round among the women and the cold pies. Sorry sight it is, too, though if all was known, daresay they'd be glad enough to whip off their aprons, poor devils, and get hold of a gun."

"I haven't the strength of mind of a bishop, sir. If I hunted on Monday, I'd want to be hunting Wednesday, and Friday as well, and if I went to a shooting-party, I couldn't for the life of me sit harmless among the pies. Bishops, you see, have had more time to get over that sort of thing. I have it all before me, and you know I never could do more than one thing at a time. Any ideas I happen to have will keep hanging round the particular thing I have in hand."

Jasper grunted.

"Just now I want to make a good thing out of a parson's life, if I can," said George, flushing. "I believe there's really a lot in it, if you can only get hold of it, and to try to do that will take all my time."

"Bally rot! There's classical truth in the virtue of sport. Centuries ago, when priests were men, they spoke of sport as the best antidote to the seven deadly sins."

"It's a difficult matter for us to thresh out, sir," said George, laughing. "Nothing I like better than sport, but I think this game more worth the candle than any other, and you don't, and if we were to batter at one another from this till Christmas, we'd get no farther. After all, I couldn't hunt and work when I was at Oxford. I had to give up horses the minute I put the pace on."

"Oxford," blurted Jasper, "was a—a preparation."

"So is this," said his son.

"Oh! hang it all! Tell me fresh air and exercise won't benefit the Church—as stuffy and stale as a woman's boudoir. What the Church wants is a good, downright fellow like Peter, with a whip of small cords to sweep the maggots out of all your brains. Back yourself up with wholesome exercise, and then go rip round among the squabbling old maids in the Church Congress. That's what will sweeten the air and attract sinners to your shop—male sinners, I mean, with muscle on 'em."

"Peter stuck to his own business, sir——"

"Wonder if he kept his wife's nose to the grindstone as well. Is the little bride to tramp the roads, too? or return her calls on a bicycle?"

"My mother will take her round, sir, won't she?"

"My son's wife should have a carriage of her own. You have ample means for it."

"Mr. Winnington! oh, Mr. Winnington!" The words leapt out through Joan's shy distress, and fell about them in a soft shower. "We've talked it all over—George and I—every single thing. George likes being a clergyman better than anything else in the whole world. And I want him to be the best clergyman that ever lived—and we don't mind—either of us, one single little atom what we do without, so that the thing we most care for is done well. It's—it's a great thing to us. You couldn't stand seeing a great thing done meanly. Oh! Mr. Winnington, now could you? Don't you see——"

"I see that my son has got hold of a girl who loves him! How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"And you may live till eighty. God bless my soul! To be doing without things till you are eighty."

"But—but I shall have George!"

"Sure enough you'll have George! Were you ever on a horse's back in your life?"

"I—I've sometimes ridden a donkey," she murmured with shame.

"That was, indeed, hilarity! It's not fair play, can't you see, either of you—to renounce the dev—hem—the usual things—before you've given 'em a fair trial."

"It makes it easier," she cried, her face alight.

"Your time, my girl, may come yet," said Jasper, his face like a tomb-stone.

"But there's no time now for *my* time," she said, with her sweet humorous young laugh. "I'm glad though, that George did all the usual things—beautifully—the things," she said softly, "that make it hard."

"Dear me, yes. All goes to give George a leg up—no efforts lost. Daresay I ought to be thanking God this minute that my good cattle went to pave the way to George's canonization. I had, however, other views."

They were now crossing the lawn. The squire glanced at his wife's superb profile, immovable in the window. "Let us get in and have some tea," said he, with courteous hopelessness.

Having greeted Rebecca cheerfully, he brought his big body to a halt in a roomy chair, and amidst the frozen silence of his family, called for whiskey and soda water. Joan felt sorry to her toes, yet glad that in no sort of way, had sin spoilt the sublimity of the *exterior* of George's father.

Had he looked in the least like some of those for whom George was about to give up everything, despair had overtaken her.

Presently Billy came in full of honest devotion, and a spiffing run. His trim pink, and inspired excitement, made freckled little Billy, for the moment actually handsome.

Joan glanced from him to George's picture in all the pomp and circumstances of pink also, just above her head. George, there was no denying, looked extremely well. And, oh! to see him just once in those brilliant trappings, transfigured by a fox!

Beatific vision, but one she could never now behold! There was a sharp twitch in Joan's heart, that came and came, and came again, hurting oddly.

And all at once she felt as though she, too, were giving up these things, and that they were very great.

Jasper meanwhile moved his chair unobtrusively near Rebecca's, and so as to shut his wife's patient profile from out his field of vision, whilst he appreciatively sipped his peg.

"Fine eyes," he remarked, jerking a shoulder towards Joan. "Pity she don't learn to use 'em before becoming a door-keeper in the House of the Lord."

"It's not my fault, anyway," said Miss Westcar.

"My dear lady, I don't accuse you. Too much of the confounded impudence of innocence about the business for either you or me. Bent on letting George, with his profession on his back, walk hobnailed over her bare body—that girl. Thought that sort of thing had gone out."

"You'll find it still in the pictures in nursery fires."

"Humph! Never look at the girl, but I see her mapping out her life and George's at one side of the fire, and her father at the other, hoping that Hell is doing its duty by his poor little wife!"

"Rather a nice taste in wine though," suggested Miss Rebecca, "and it's a pleasure to put decent food before her."

Jasper groaned.

"With George turning the loose boxes into a crèche, and the coach-house into a kindergarten! He's to beat the Parish on a bicycle; she to foot it, unless for an odd lift from Isabella. Pleasant jaunts ahead of the poor innocent, eh?"

"She has courage."

"She has. Her eye, I give you my word, is on *my* soul already."

"She will fix it soon upon something more tangible. Joan is not devoid of understanding. She'll be wanting a leg-up presently—that girl, and upon my word I don't see who is to give it to her, but you." Rebecca glanced with serene thoughtfulness at Jasper's family circle.

"I? God bless my soul! I?"

"There's no one else. I'll depend on you, Jasper. It's a trust, remember," she added, with a hoarse laugh, moving as though to rise.

"Not going yet? Sit down, Rebecca, and don't let it be five years and a fortnight before you come again."

She flushed with flashing eyes, but nodded sternly at the decanter.

"What matter visits or visitors with that at hand?"

"Other fools besides our two young ones like seeing pictures in the fire. Only in my case it requires a more biting fillip than George to set them going."

"Hold your impious tongue, Jasper, and remember you've got to see that Joan isn't etherealised to Heaven before her feet have touched the earth. Things here have been going from bad to worse in these five years. That's plain enough. There used to be a genial side to you, Jasper. Can't you show it in your own family?"

"Family don't appreciate it. Have no sense of humour, my family."

"Hem!"

"Of my peculiar form of humour, then. Think it's all due to strong waters. Never saw a family so singularly sensitive to sin. Been brought up to abhor it, you see, more especially when it interferes with entertaining and their prospects in life. Sin shrivels 'em up, and, oh, well! they shrivel me up. The girls are a lot away, you see, and can't get used to me. You need'nt glare, my dear lady. I know. But with one thing or another, I'm a bit afraid of 'em all, girls and boys. Puts you off, when they shrink if you touch 'em. Uncanny in flesh and blood of your own. Eh? I tell you, Rebecca, you've done well to stick to the recruiting business."

"Don't gloss ugly fact with sickly sentiment, Jasper. It's never been your way. Yes, you've certainly gone off in five years. Come, put me into my carriage, and remember I give Joan into your hands."

"It's a proposal I'm not likely to forget," said Jasper, with his mighty laugh.

"He'll look after her," thought Rebecca, huddling up in her corner, miserably, "so far one can trust him. After another decade of hard drinking, God only knows."

CHAPTER VII.

JUST a week later, Beatrice and Cora were married on the same day. There was less pomp connected with the ceremony than they could have wished, but more respectability than they had dared to hope for.

Their father gave them sumptuous presents, behaved with unswerving propriety, and looked all that he ought to have been.

He was at a loss, indeed, to account for the astonishing selections of his girls; and since he seemed to be accountable for most of the family affliction, concluded, that in the natural course of things, Billy and the toy Soldier would also be put down to his score. He shrugged his great shoulders, with a whimsical smile, felt profoundly unhappy, and a good deal of an outsider.

But ever when sad and sober Jasper could show a brave front to the World. He might have been the stately Head of his House these forty years so well did he play up to the character.

His speech was admirable. As a father he triumphed.

Beatrice and Cora solemnly thanked their stars.

This, however, was not the first time that Mrs. Winnington had beholden Jasper in this model mood, and she remembered sequels. Her heart failed her for fear.

Whilst George, who also had memories, threw many an anxious glance at Joan. He could see clearly enough through all the painful farce, and behind all the regal posturing a profound and sore disdain. Only too well did he know that under his fine sonorous sentences the old man's tongue was in his cheek.

It was impossible to predict at what moment his wild

wit might not burst its bonds and scatter that goodly company; and George longed to keep the day perfect for his betrothed.

The sole representative of Miss Rebecca at the feast was her Crown Derby dinner set. It had been packed up that morning, in a barrel, and sent post haste off to Beatrice, to Joan's blank surprise, for it had been partly promised to herself.

Miss Rebecca had been indeed that morning full of surprises. At the last moment, to Joan's mute distress, she had dispatched *her* alone to the festivity, hitched up her best silk and gone recruiting, only just pausing to call out over her shoulder:

"My absence will cause neither surprise nor heart-burning, and I only accepted provisionally. Tell Isabella Winton what your conscience and your kindness may suggest." Of a sudden she swung round and lowered her tones: "And listen, child! Hold up your head and think of George. That'll give you courage; and remember, moreover, that a Westcar is equal to any Winton born, and that you invariably look clean.—I'd only be telling Jasper what I think of him," she said as she stumped off, "and it's such waste of reason. Now directly he sees Joan amidst that heartless crowd, he'll take care that she don't suffer either in feelings or in position, and shepherding her will keep him out of mischief. I feel in my bones the girl's more to the point alone, and done quickly like this she'll have no time to be disappointed at my defection. And after all to be with Jasper is to be hating Isabella all the time like the very devil. Isabella is a temptation to be avoided."

Joan, however, did feel forlorn and deserted, and the alienation of the Crown Derby set hurt her keenly. It was so very commentless a switching away of a promised boon. She could feel the snapping of Miss Rebecca's lips as she mentally transferred the beautiful dishes.

There was coherence, however, underlying the vagrancy in the high-handed procedure.

It was symbolical of the workings of progressive affection in Miss Rebecca, and of the Spirit in George.

Her duty to Joan Miss Rebecca had been finding out, somewhat to her dismay, could no longer be wiped

out with a dinner set, and with George in his present phase, one she could but fear, with destroying staying powers, she saw before her an uninterrupted vista of village hussies in course of reformation, smashing her ancestral china. Beatrice would never err on the side of domestic benevolence, she would inevitably choose her servants for what they could do for her, not for what she could do for them. The china in Beatrice's possession would endure. For Joan she designed other and mightier things; "If only she could bring her mind to it——" she added with an odd grey doubt.

The first brilliant clash of excitement past, the healths all drunken, the speeches all made, the jokes grown chill, the brides tired of wreaths, and longing for the fresher glories of going-away dresses, with the cold air of every day at dull play again amongst the broken meats, and the women softly comparing chronological notes on the two brides; in this perilous moment of satiety the usual sousing wave of sad cold cynicism swept over Jasper Winnington. He grinned a Pagan grin, and got hold of an all too handy magnum, but in turning, he caught sight of Joan wedged in between two Divines.

They had been glad of the opportunity of seeing something of young Winnington's future wife, these anxious gentlemen, and had been plying her with weird wit of a professional flavour, throwing in by the way certain leading questions wherewith they were used to probe the feminine mind. To the questions Joan had made obedient reply, but the wit dismayed her. She could only smile faintly and "wonder how they possibly could."

With a general impression on their minds of a deplorable lack of humour, and much indeterminate youth, the one provided her with salt, the other gently poured water into her champagne, and returned to the discreeter joys of the table.

They were good, spare-living men as a rule, with a sound enjoyment of permitted things, quite capable, moreover, of high-thinking when the occasion arose. Joan, however, where the Church was concerned, was capable of nothing else. She hoped no one would notice the frank enjoyment of the great and good men, and tried to see

George clearly through the mist of flowers that obscured her vision. But Jasper's chuckling enjoyment of the watered wine, relaxed his grasp on the magnum.

"To bury her in the Church before her time," he muttered, "just like Isabella! I'll see to this."

Only too glad to snatch the privileges of his exceptional notoriety Jasper called down the table in his pleasant rolling voice: "Now we've scattered all our available incense before the two brides that are, it's quite time we began to think of the one that is to be. Come up here, Joan; there is just room for you beside me. Jones, champagne to Mr. Dean. Since we've got the Church in the midst of us for good," he explained to the blushing Joan, "we must take care of it. How did the watered champagne strike you?"

"It—it was rather horrid, but it—it showed a nice spirit, don't you think?"

"It did. Try some of this to take the taste off."

Relieved of ecclesiastical pressure and with an uninterrupted view of George, Joan's face now kindled with interest, and soon her eyes were drinking in, with surprised wonder, the impersonally amused serenity of the modern bride. It was a thing beyond her. She returned to George and from him travelled thoughtfully to his spiritual superiors.

"Don't distress yourself," counselled Jasper, "George will have learnt many things and unlearnt more before *he's* an Archdeacon."

"He'll be George still," she murmured resolutely.

"In that case he'll never be an Archdeacon."

"There are plenty of Archdeacons!"

"And only one George, there I quite agree with you. But you're missing opportunities. Get back to your under-study."—He nodded in the direction of his daughters.—"Both types are worthy of attention. It's difficult to predict from Beatrice's face whether she's more amused at herself—Billy, **BILLY**"—Jasper could throw a volume into a tone—"or the accessories. That's your dashing type. Whatever comes, Beatrice will foot it merrily to the end, and she'll foot it honestly, I believe. Cora's bored already, and shows it. The soldier, poor devil, has been bored from his birth. I hope they won't yawn each other into

looking out for antidotes," he added under his breath. "The girls, both of 'em, were," he proceeded, narrowing his eyes to throw them up and down the smiling brides, "naturally enough, more interested in the process of getting engaged, than in the objects. Robbed of their occupation life will fall confoundedly flat. A bad quarter of an hour in a woman's life when she's time to look round her and find she's burnt every boat, eh, Joan!"

"But," said Joan, with alarmed eyes, "didn't you say anything before the marriages?"

"Say anything to a woman with an exceptional establishment in view once her back teeth have begun to go!—You can read the better part of a woman's mind in her dentist's bill.—My child, you under-rate my sanity; besides, I've lost the privilege of being didactic in my own family. You must experience the virtuous life before you can slate it. A shocking example, if he is to be of any service, must hold his peace. A thing to be observed, you'll understand, not hearkened to. An amiable blindness on the part of women, by the way. There's the seed of good advice in every sin, pity it should dry up for want of culture. I once advised Beatrice to marry a subaltern of Dragoons; a man she honestly loved. She's never thought much of my intelligence since."

"Mr. Winnington! Oh!"—There were no words for the painful surprises in the face of George's father. Her troubled eyes turned to George.

"She adores," mused Jasper, "and is a fool. And yet she's not altogether a confounded snivelling pap-howl.—And after all it's something now-a-days to come slick upon true love, and a confounded brace of fools. I've seen enough wisdom to-day to put me off it for a month of Sundays, and yet I suppose I'd better be trying some on the poor girl.—Supposing now," he said, his eyes bent upon Joan, "supposing I were to advise you to let George sail off to Heaven on his own account, and choose a fellow with more of the archdeacon in him?—excellent man, large and increasing family; has made a clean sweep of all the drunkards in his parish; is the terror of loafers; fills his church; can set all the women crying with a turn of an eyelid, and overflow the plate. Well! what would you say?"

"I shouldn't say anything," said Joan, with spirit, "for I know you couldn't possibly mean it."

At this point, with a soft murmur and a swish of skirts, they all rose.

Jasper had been meaning to spread himself for a moment in the gun-room before tackling the final scene, but he thought better of it, and followed Joan.

As Joan passed Mrs. Winnington, the lady caught her arm in a nerveless clutch, and her eyes, a little kindness struggling through their grey gloom, rested thankfully upon her, and there were worlds of tenderness in George's glance.

Joan felt very happy, but was at a loss to account for such poignancy of loving kindness. But, little as she knew it, she had saved a delicate situation, and earned the gratitude of a quaking family.

Three weeks later she was married herself, in Miss Rebecca's cobwebby lace, her face lifted to a fine significance by the touch of a blind and beautiful love.

The Bishop married them. Miss Rebecca, having fallen foul of George's late rector, insisted upon his Lordship's rushing down from Leeds to perform the ceremony.—*He* could discern no cause for congratulation in the untoward jaunt. It was on the eve of the Church Congress, and extremely inconvenient.

Rendered cynical by his forced march, and from having tied the knots at some three hundred fashionable marriages, yet even he stifled his natural feeling, stayed his wit, and bowed his head before the two young faces lit up by the light of some wonderful elsewhere known only to a holy youth.

It was a fixed principle with the Bishop to swing the Tangible like a censer under the proud noses of his curates. He distrusted, good practical man, aerial flights and foreign illuminations upon the ingenuous countenances of the minor clergy; they were productive mostly of antics and women's chatter. He had never permitted *himself* such indulgences, and could feel, without vanity, that the result justified the self-denial. But there was that in the faces of young George Winnington and his wife which subdued criticism, and brought back the freshness of youth to a tired world.

The burly Bishop swung out of the Church, a light-footed curate again, mapping out a noble life beside Coelia Graves, a young creature who had loved much, dead these twenty years. His present help-meet, christened Amelia, was a lady temperate in all things as befitted the wife of one of the Higher Clergy.

She was predestined to her post, Coelia Graves would probably have made hay of it, and yet the Bishop sighed.

"There are some marriages in regard to which one may venture to prophesy," he said presently to Miss Rebecca, casting a benignant glance at the bridal pair.

"You have more temerity than I can pretend to. She's eminently elementary and just as likely to be a clerical hen, as a martyr." She marched on to where the two were standing firm under the usual broadsides of congratulations, and put a great case into Joan's hands.

"I waited till you were a Winnington to give you these, Joan," said she. "I'm glad to know you'll never disgrace them." She touched a secret spring and the wonderful Westcar diamonds, after a seclusion of five-and-thirty years, flashed into the light of day.

There were tears in Miss Rebecca's heart as she had made the transfer, but now she had more practical matters to deal with.

"You will note, George, that the things are settled upon you and upon your heirs for ever," said she, in her most impressive voice, "as unconvertible property. I'll take good care you don't go pawning them for parish repairs."

"My dear, generous Rebecca!" cried Isabella, profoundly moved, "but how quaint you are, dear old friend! Pawning!"

"A sailor who loves his ship, or a Priest who loves his Church, are equally impervious to the promptings of common morality," said Miss Rebecca crossly.

Seeing Dr. Baker staring at her, with a sickly look of sentiment on his face, and Jasper with an unhealthy longing upon his, she clutched hold of the younger man's arm, glad to have anything, even partially human, to hold on to. "Come," she commanded, "I want you both."

She carried them off and stood over them while they swallowed a bumper apiece of brandy and eggs, carefully compounded by her own hands.

"They're off to Palestine, of all places in the world," she told the Bishop presently, with a vast sigh, "and will come back with their ridiculous faces shining worse than ever."

Which indeed they did, back to a Vicarage pink with old roses, and a world grey with old woes.

CHAPTER VIII.

DIRECTLY the Winningtons were settled in their Vicarage, the Bishop's wife made it a point to ask them to a mixed dinner.

It would have been more convenient and a great saving of expense in the matter of wines, to have made the dinner purely clerical, but with the Winnington connection and Miss Rebecca's tongue this was quite out of the question.

Mrs. Mercer was really extremely uneasy in her mind. When a man of Gregory's age and position begins to talk in his sleep of shining faces in connection with the wife of one of his Vicars, one naturally thinks of Jezebel, and feels that the time has come when the man must be protected against himself. Visions may prepare the way to anything. They very certainly show the direction in which the wind is blowing. But until she could behold with her bodily eyes the source of his untimely excitement, Mrs. Mercer found it difficult to proceed.

She was immensely relieved when she saw Joan. With her mother's reputation—raked up in the course of conscientious investigations—and the Bishop's symptoms, she had been prepared for anything. The minute Joan appeared, she felt that she was precisely the wife she could herself have chosen for a rising young vicar. Quiet, amiable, unassuming. No beauty, but quite good looks enough for a vicar. Not a trace of mawkish Madonna airs about the poor little thing! It must have been pure indigestion on the part of the Bishop!

Here she again pressed Joan's hands. "Jezebel!" she thought, a motherly, amused smile playing on her lips; "Jezebel!" she repeated, with a glance at Joan's dress, strong in quality, and of the best silk, but somewhat feeble

in cut. With a kindly touch on her shoulder, Mrs. Mercer pressed the girl down into a padded chair, reserved usually for rectors' wives.

"Since she's so quite what she ought to be," she mused, "I wish she'd worn that lovely Westcar lace, and——" she hesitated, pondering, "well, why not, after all?—and some of the diamonds. It would be an oasis in this desert." She threw a melancholy glance around her sober guests, the wordly contingent not having yet arrived, and passed on, dropping words of wisdom as she went.

She kept Joan well in her mind, however, and introduced her to the County, a ceremony she omitted in the case of the other clerical ladies, and in a hundred ways showed the girl that upon the light of her episcopal countenance she might always firmly depend.

But Joan, perceiving presently that she shone a star amongst glow-worms, not because George was George, but because he happened to be a Winnington, of Thryng, felt all twitching and horrid. She turned to look with half-shy, wholly appreciative eyes at the alight, luminous faces of those well-groomed women above the salt, to listen to their voices, and catch the meanings in the quick quiver of repartee in the air. She sat up straight, and words and laughter came rippling up in herself. Then suddenly she looked at George, and slipped quietly down amongst the less-favoured ladies, glowering round in their dim circle in black dresses with weird relievings.

The next minute she regretted it bitterly. Still, it did not seem to her that she could have done otherwise. It was right, and George was witness.

The clerical ladies were, on the whole, kind to the new recruit, and lenient to her practical incapacity, and to the sudden odd radiances that would break out now and then all over her face at quite ordinary parochial allusions.

Joan found them rather dull and unresponsive. She wondered what sort of things they did like, and wriggled round so that she could see George within his circle of men.

His smile jogged her faltering wits. She was young and full of enterprise, and upon further diggings found that every woman present had a baby upon her hearthstone, and that, howsoever locked to all other influences a woman's

face may be, it will yet open always to the magic key of her own baby. So that you may read there all her heart, and every height and every depth of which she is capable.

George was immensely proud and pleased as he watched Joan's gentle little manœuvre—conducted for all its gentleness with a touch of the grand air. "Joan can afford to go her own quiet way without any ecclesiastical patronage," he reflected, with lifted head, the soldier in him wholly swamping the saint.

In short, Joan was then and afterwards rather a success in clerical circles, but she found them wearing.

The minor attributes of other people's babies, and the sufferings they entail upon their mothers, when carefully edited and gone into by the happy sufferers, will in time weigh upon a babyless woman still in her teens, howsoever anxious she may be to be worthy of a George. Of other society Joan soon found she could have just as much as she liked.

To draw Mrs. Winnington from her proud seclusion had long since been given up as hopeless. The Squire was enchanting, imperial, and impossible. Moreover, he snapped his fingers gaily in their faces, and would have none of them.

The County would have welcomed gladly, therefore, any Winnington, but the prospect of a saintly one with an adoring wife was absolutely exciting in its naïve rarity.

The Vicarage of Thryng was noted for its old-world roses, sweet with the fragrance of the ages, blooming bravely throughout nine months of the year. They were the joy of Joan's heart, and every minute of every day being quite full, she used to get up at unearthly hours to fill the house with them, for, to her ordered, anxious mind, a withered rose would have been a serious reproach.

The rose-filled drawing-room with its atmosphere of living peace became quite soon rather the vogue. It often now throbbed with callers. Stately and kind matrons, sick to death of stifling airs, liked to breathe there as they used to breathe at twenty; and girls were anxious to look upon love amongst the roses outside the book covers of a past age.

And sometimes George came in for tea—so he said, but

really in order to gather new belief and strength from the sight of Joan's faithful face. Her own words seemed clumsy, dull things when George came in, so then she spoke in smiles.

George, however, spoke pleasantly about everything. He could be gentle, alert, sharp, decisive. He could laugh with the best, and deride on occasion with a fine wit, and upon sacred things he was silent. He breathed out his religion, however; it made its mark in the very air.

"George is a man and a soldier, thank Heaven," said Miss Rebecca one day as she looked round the room, "and yet this is the Pool of Bethesda. Odd anomaly! It's a sort of general manhood, moreover, that distinguishes George. There's even a fine manly tramp in the dauntless, wholesale manner of his selfishness." Joan glared. Miss Rebecca serenely proceeded, "No mawkish apology there! He doesn't have to hustle round proving his manhood with cricket or boxing manias. In my private opinion curates frequently plunge boisterously into games just to prove to the public that despite all testimony to the contrary, they really are men. Methinks they do protest too much. I hate blatant manhood. If George spent his leisure in knitting garters for the heathen he'd yet be a man."

One day three invitations to two dinners and one dance arrived by the midday post. Hitherto, Joan's taste of the new order had consisted in visits paid and returned. At sight of the invitations, her heart began to riot in a ridiculous sort of way; then by some unaccountable impulse she ran upstairs, took out Miss Rebecca's diamonds excitedly, and with a quick catch in her breath, opened her dress and held up a pendant against her neck. She wondered if her skin really was extraordinarily white, or if she only thought so because of having seen so few necks. The front door opened, and she ran down again to find George reading the invitations.

"I say, here's dissipation," was all he said, but he was silent all through luncheon. His silence silenced her, and when she thought of her late foolishness she blushed.

"Suppose we take a holiday for an hour," he said, as soon as they had finished. "Come along to the den."

He put her into a chair near the open window. "Sit

here where you can see the roses comfortably," said he laughing, "or you'll be craning your neck to look at them, and I want you to attend to me. Of course, one expected invitations, they would come as a matter of course. And now we've got to arrange what to do about them."

He paused, half startled. Could it be possible that Joan had got a little white? Joan saw his puzzled doubt and it roused her.

"Do you disapprove of going out?" she asked, in her clear, young voice.

"Disapprove? No, of course, it's not that, but we've got so little time. Everything's been going to seed here this long time, and in all the outlying hamlets there's work waiting. But it's not only that——" He broke off sharply, stood up, and walked restlessly to the door and back to Joan. "Directly I got to know you—properly," he said, looking down at her, "and to find out new things about you, everything in and about me seemed to be new, too. Ideas I'd never had before began to creep into me—at first, but soon they fairly pelted me. I was rather afraid of them at the start. They were bigger than myself—as big as you! They were too good for me. I didn't care to tackle them yet. I thought I'd wait, as I had waited for you! But they wouldn't let me; they kept pegging away at me till I had to set them down on paper and see what could be done with them, and then, somehow, germs seemed to spread into sentences, and in the rush of words one seemed to get hold of the right one at a glance, and one wrote and wrote. But it wouldn't do. The next day I invariably burnt it; no words were good enough for the thoughts which all seemed to be the best of *you*. But one day I couldn't burn the thing; there was altogether too much of you in it, and of the heart of things, even in the words. Do you remember Kipling's 'Finest story in the World'? Something like that was going on in me. And—now—now you're to judge if it's good. You're as true as truth, my Joan, so you'll know if the truth is in it. If I'm an ass being brayed in my own folly," he said, flushing painfully, and she saw on his forehead little beads of sweat, "I don't think, I don't think—not truly—that I'm a self-complacent ass. It all hurt horribly, and folly's not painful as a rule, so they say. If—if this thing—is good—for the

next few years, I'll have to give my life to it." He was walking up and down the room again, his eyes blazing. "I want to make man's passion for God as entrancing, as moving, as sweet, as sublime, as man's passion for woman. I want to—to move the hearts of men as poets have moved their senses," he jerked out, as shy as a boy in the presence of fine language, whilst yet the words came racing. "I want to make the higher love human—human, throbbing, intoxicating, as natural as the other, as inexhaustible and all-compelling. So far England has never given of her best to the Church in Literature. We've not come yet within cry of Pascal. It's a vast, an illimitable field if one could only get one's foot upon it.

"I know all the arguments, dear," said he, "I'm clear-headed sometimes at night. I've had it out with my youth and ignorance and inexperience," he cried, a great entreaty in his voice, "and even that won't stop me! Nothing can stop me, but you! And if you give the forward order, then it will take all our time.

"It's a thing to be done while we're young together, young and warm with love. It's not data one wants, you see, or knowledge, or theology, or sound doctrine," he cried, in eager deprecation. "It really isn't. What I'm trying to do comes from within somehow. One winds it out of one like a spider. Your one fear is lest you snap the thread as it comes. Last night when I stumbled over you in the passage, I'd been running from Taddler's Hollow lest I'd lose something before it got written down, I'd forgotten my pencil. Now listen, and judge—and I'll know that your verdict is true——"

"Yes," she said faintly, suddenly feeling a little sick. "Go on."

He took some papers out of a drawer. "I wonder if I shall feel in as big a funk at the last day," he said, with a laugh, as he spread out his MS. He began slowly, and his voice, rather wobbly and halting at first, seemed suddenly to hurry thickly in and out of sentences leading apparently nowhither, or so it seemed to Joan. Her hands twitched cold in her lap. Her heart fell like lead in her body; her ears were strained to bursting point. She could catch nothing but George's harsh, strained, altered voice jerking through senseless thronging words.

He wanted truth—truth! “And to break a man’s heart with truth like this!” she thought.

Shivering, the wretched critic hid her face in her hands. George looked up sharply, and threw down the papers.

“The Judgment Day is a fool to this! Wait, Joan! Let me see your face. It’s got to be read. Talk of funk! Didn’t know what it meant till now—not properly. Don’t hide your face again, dear. It puts me off. And don’t begin to judge yet, wait—do! It’s part of your poem. It can’t be humbug. It hurt, it hurt vilely while they wrote it; it worked like madness in one’s veins, and the most raging neuralgia, and the—the joys of a thousand Heavens.”

He caught his breath, he stumbled on, half-blind with nervousness. He missed words, slurred whole sentences, and Joan sat holding herself quite still.

Of a sudden he threw the book on the table, white, despairing. “Don’t you see,” he said, “it’s like reading your own death-warrant. It’s a lot worse, it’s like reading yours.”

Joan rose and went slowly to the table, wondering drearily if it would make things any better were she to read the death-warrant, but it seemed, somehow, the only thing left her to do.

For a minute the words jiggled before her hot eyes. She leant hard on the table and steadied herself, and presently the writing grew clearer. Joan hated shivering on the brink of anything. She plunged in boldly, but voicelessly.

She must rehearse this death-warrant first in her own heart. Down the page she went, and up again, down and up, breathless and amazed, and at last she broke into a wonderful laugh.

“Sit down—sit down and listen. It’s—it’s all right. Ah!” she cried, “it frightens me.”

He sprang to her.

“Don’t!” she threw up her hands like a barrier. “Don’t! Can’t you see? I must get it read. Listen!”

She tried once—twice. Then the power came, and she began to read.

To Joan it seemed that the spirit of God ran through the poem like a white flame—a white, quenchless, exulting flame that carried all before it. It was the passion born from the religion of all the worlds, touched by genius. It

throbbed with the hearts of all the children and of all the wise.

To Joan's excited imagination very God and very man stood there together almost comprehensible, and the lines swung forward in a fine majestic simplicity, with a happy young joyousness of surety so infinitely alluring that even wiser heads than Joan's might have been carried away.

A theologian, had he heard it, might cough discreetly when the glamour had gone off. A logician reserve his judgment, but there was genius in the poem, strength and sincerity, and it would sink into the hearts of men and work there.

George was leaning on the table, his head in his hands.

"Oh! George! Oh! George!" she cried. Then she huddled down beside him, and of a sudden, like a child crying in the night, she broke into terrified sobbing.

She was broken down with greatness, and a bright world seemed to be shutting its golden doors in her face.

And George in his loving, single heart blessed her for her passionate sympathy.

In frantic haste she dried her eyes, sat up, and with an extraordinary effort steadied her face and voice.

"Oh! George!" said she, "it certainly will want all your time; but the other work—the Parish——" She paused. "It's suddenly all got so common-place," she cried, her eyes widening.

"That's only just for the minute. I used to feel it so at first, and thinking of you brought things right again. Now I couldn't do this without the Parish, and I don't think I could do the Parish without this."

"How shall we manage about the invitations? What shall we say?" said Joan, picking up a crested sheet slowly.

George's sensitive face flushed, but his eyes were steady. "That's the horrible part of the business. One can't explain. Any explanation would suggest inevitably the mountain in travail with the mouse. I'm nothing, and I've done nothing to earn the right to airs, and I don't want in any way to prejudice people against this thing in advance. It would be like injuring the prospects of an unborn child, don't you see? Besides, one doesn't like being looked on as a prig, or an ass either. After all," he faltered, "we may be wrong—you and I—this may be worthless. At any rate,

I don't see why the onus of refusing should rest on you. We might go to these three, of course."

Joan's heart gave a big jump, and her feet were aching to dance.

George went to the window, and after a minute swung back to her. "That would complicate things all round, though, and offend everyone," said he. "I say, Joan, it's a lovely day; go and put on your things and we'll go to see them, and explain that just for the present we've got such lots to do—unless——" Joan's eyes disturbed him, her brave, bright eyes looked afraid. "Unless you'd like to go out with any of these three ladies," he said, touching the letters.

"No," said Joan.

"They'd gladly take you," said George half-nervously. "It's not the slightest use depending on Miss Rebecca, you know."

"Go out? Without you? George, are you crazy?"

"I didn't think you'd like it," he said hesitating, not yet satisfied; there was a new spell in the air. "And—but it won't be for long, you know—why, in ten years time we'll still be quite young."

"Oh, yes, we'll still be quite young—quite young," she repeated mechanically.

But to nineteen nothing but nineteen is quite, quite young, and with a world bright with dew at its feet, nineteen wants to be picking its flowers to-day, to-day, and not to-morrow.

"George," called back Joan, in a voice that struck her as already old and croaking, "please pump up my front wheel."

"Yes, dear," he said absently, and seized with a lovely metaphor, he flew to write it down and clean forgot the bicycle.

Joan looked at the jewel case still open upon her bed, and hustled it away in a drawer. The jewels were too dazzling; they brought the tears to her eyes, which since she was just going out for a ride with George was altogether too ridiculous.

His metaphor right to its uttermost syllable, and the lion of Joan's verdict chased from his path, George was filled to the brim with hope and courage, and fulfilled his mission finely. Arguments melted like wax before his proud and merry youth. In his fight for his own time there was the

vigour of a man, the eager deprecation of a boy. Less lenient hearts than Joan's were moved and stirred that day by his stubborn laughing resistance to their cajolements, and even the defeated hostesses raised no jeer at the Church ; that scapegoat of the witty modern.

For a ripple of singularly agreeable humanity played lightly upon George's spirituality, and held his name fragrant, his profession of good report.

There was wit, however, as well as wisdom amongst these ladies who joined hands against George, and in their ways over all a power of persuasion.

And like the rich young man, Joan went away sorrowful.

A pathetic figure of a man, I take it, this dead deserter, deserving of more tenderness than ever he is likely to get. A man's reputation once blown upon, it comes always so easy to us others to put the black cap on !

"Now I've plunged and told you everything," said George, when he came in late that night tired with work, but teeming with ideas. He had trudged a good five miles through drizzling showers, and given two cottage lectures ; but on his way he had beholden Heaven in the eyes of a dying Christian, and made a drunkard, savable and worthy of salvation, take the pledge ; and even seven years to a mighty love is but as a span.

"Now I've made a clean breast of it, won't you stay with me, Joan, when I write ? I can't tell you what your nearness doesn't do for me, and your perfect sympathy. You're a never failing counsel of perfection."

Joan was tired also to her very heart, and though her love—for George—was mighty also, teaching the elements of a bleak morality to friendly girls fretted her ; and cutting thirty chemises out of unbleached calico seemed to have shorn her of all enthusiasm. She wanted to be alone, moreover, to contend with her worldly desires ; but she looked up bright and alert.

"George ! Of course ! And I can be getting on with that surplice at the same time."

"You're a melodious sort of woman, Joan," he said, as he arranged his papers ; "I don't believe you could make a false note if you tried. Now, as you sit there, you and that white cloudy effect are just exactly right."

Joan dug her needle into her finger and flushed horribly.

fine linen, and, for all her quietness, when she hated things she hated them after a passionate, violent, and wholly unexpected fashion.

To punish herself she now threw all her powers fiercely into every stitch, and the seams of that surplice were indeed a work of art.

CHAPTER IX.

"It's been a perfect night," said George, after three solid hours of mute and enraptured labour. "I'll never forget it."

"Neither shall I," thought Joan. The thought, however, leapt out unbidden and startled her.

"And the surplice is finished," she said hurriedly.

"What sermons I'll preach in that surplice!" said her husband, with honest pleasure.

Joan said nothing. She was folding up the abhorred garment and hoping that she wouldn't fall asleep on her feet.

"It's been a red letter day, without one flaw in it," proceeded George, nursing his happiness. "We've arranged comfortably about the going-out business and the secret is still our own."

Joan roused herself with an effort.

"Oh! George!" she cried; "I don't think I can help telling Cousin Rebecca—and I want you to let me tell your father."

"My father?—my father?" repeated George blankly. That genial besom of destruction it were vain to deny was an abiding canker in his son's heart, and had lately been sweeping lustily across the Parish with most melancholy results.

Joan was aware of the fact, and she held down her head.

The resolute appeal in her drooping figure moved George, however, more than a score of arguments could have done.

"I wish," said he, with a human enough sigh, although he laughed, "I wish I didn't feel that on the whole you're right."

"George," said she, after a pause, "don't be thinking that this has spoilt the day. It hasn't truly. It—it's saved it," she murmured, too sleepy now to choose her words.

George, as he put away his tools, smiled at the quaint confusion of ideas, for in spite of his poetic turn, he was a man of a neat habit.

The Squire, who even if he did happen to be drinking lustily at midnight, was always up at six, and with any poachers about never went to bed at all, and was none the worse for it, being abroad early next morning, thought he'd stroll round and see what the parson was up to.

He had been having a rousing time of it lately, and was now suffering the pangs of a cold reaction. He was thoroughly disgusted therefore with himself and every one else. At the same time, for the very life of him, he could not refrain from recalling with genuine delight certain of the lighter savageries amidst the blacker episodes of his late outrageous outburst.

There were many hours in Jasper's mad career wherein had he not been able to chuckle heartily over the hilarious quantity in his unseemly pranks, he had undoubtedly sent a bullet through his brain.

Now, as he passed in unworthy review the latest regrettable occurrences, he smiled with fiendish glee as he thought of the terror of a haughty and supercilious town-maid whom, when out upon the track of malefactors, he had discovered entertaining a hawker of known sporting proclivities with his best whiskey. How he had carried the kicking damsel to the topmost branch of the trysting tree, wedged her firmly in a snug crook, wherein, being town-bred, and a fool, she screeched till the morning, whilst the hawker, securely hobbled with a dog-chain, groaned beneath.

He remembered consolingly his recent raid upon the fine Public House lately set up in Thryng—the host forever snivelling of the Law to honest late labourers, and so soon as the blinds were down, filling his bar with fuddled idiots playing losing Poker.

"I scattered 'em, I scattered 'em," the Squire crowed. "And did thereby more good in twenty minutes than George would do in a year."

He now awoke from his reverie to find himself on the knoll above the Church, whence from his great height he could look sheer into the edifice, where George was reading Daily Prayers to Joan and six others.

"Six foot two in his stockings, forty-two inches round the chest, muscles on him like whipcords, and to be smiling like a seraph above as one-horse a show as that," groaned Jasper. "A fellow with size, health and intellect to turn on you in that sort of way. It takes your breath away. And Isabella—Isabella, as large as life in the second pew, tragic to her toes!"

The suppressed maddening irritation in every nerve in Jasper's great body leapt out in a wild rush. His ruddy face whitened. "She lied—she slandered a good woman," he muttered, glaring down upon his praying wife—"she betrayed a decent enough man—and all to be mistress of Thryng—and look at her now! It was no take-all and give nothing business," he continued, with a vicious stare. "All she's got she's deserved. And—she's had her revenge. She's brought my girls up to despise me, and robbed me of my sons. 'Twas her doing," he said fiercely—"hers. Ha! Woman! You may well pray."

His eyes flung away from her and fetched up on Joan in the front pew, her profound attentive eyes fixed upon George, with the look of one searching diligently.

"That little girl—that little girl," said the Squire, after a long stare, "has a way of—of taking the gilt off the gingerbread, so to speak."

His uneasy eyes somehow refused to detach themselves from Joan. He sighed, left sophistry, and turned with a wry face to fact.

"From her own point of view Isabella no doubt has had rather a life of it, poor soul!" he ruefully admitted. "It's been a bad business altogether for her. 'Pon my soul, I could be sorry enough for her if—if, hang it all, if she wasn't false to the core, and could think an inch or so above the earth. If a woman can't think high sometimes, God in Heaven, what's a man to do? The very sight of her, strive as you will, sends a chill down your back." The contemplation of Isabella lifting her voice to praise God filled him with a deeper dejection.

"She's honest, too, and zealous," he admitted with a

sigh, "but with the best intentions it's Mrs. Grundy she serves and sings to, not the Lord of Hosts. What the women are thinking of her, that's the tune, and how she'll best hush me up! Dear, dear! A pretty pass to come to to be a mere slur on your family—a thing to be hushed up, by Gad!"

Being reverent by nature he here ordered his meditations, but at the third verse his sorrows sent him crashing back upon their source.

"Isabella singing a hymn," he muttered, "and handsome still, while poor Rebecca has a moustache! Queer decree of Providence that! Can't see Rebecca deserved it. Oh, well! Isabella's scored. Perhaps it's a comfort to her. Morning," he continued wearily, "morning plays the deuce with your—your courage." He leant his chin on his tall gold-headed malacca. "An early service," he mused, "must be a wonderful outlet for injured wives, sort of pick-me-up, so to speak. Can quite understand Isabella's fancy for it. She can chuck all she's got to say about me off her chest in prayer, and feel all the better for it.—Hullo, here they come—and George looks as though he was going to breakfast at Drew's! By Jove! Well, I'll drop in on the little girl—daresay George has got some beer in the house."

When he came face to face with Joan in the laurel walk, her face startled him.

"Little girl might have been having a night of it too. Egad! Sins all about her ears also," he reflected, with raised eyebrows. "Morning, my girl, will you give me some breakfast?"

"Oh! Won't I?" she cried. "But—George's out!"

"George is out—is he?" said his artful father; "never mind, you're in."

She seized him as though he might escape her, brought him in, set him in the sun, and went about her preparations in a quick noiseless way, that soothed his jumping nerves.

The breath of Heaven was blowing through the room.—Isabella sealed up every air-hole, as though it would let in rats. The place seemed to be chock full of roses and innocence.

Jasper felt a diffidence in mentioning the beer; but

there was a consuming thirst upon him. The girl, he noticed, was obviously proud of her coffee—he'd have been glad to oblige her—but—and after all if a man couldn't own up to a little beer, he'd better be cutting his throat at once! "No doubt George has some bitter beer," said Jasper, mildly.

"Oh!" she cried, aghast. "He hasn't, not one single bottle. Don't you know——" she halted. Jasper slowly groaned.

"Taken to the blue ribbon. Ah! I see. Didn't think it was as bad as that. Do you sport the token too, my dear?"

"No, and neither does George, but Winty's promised not to have any wine or whiskey or beer in his house for a year if George doesn't either."

"Honest fellow, Winty, pays his rent to the day."

"But he beats his wife to a jelly."

"Oh! Wives——"

"She's not that sort of wife."

"Meek wisp, if I remember aright."

"After five years beating one naturally would cringe," pleaded Joan.

"Humph! I distrust overbearing morality. George making promises for a delicate girl he ought to be feeding up with red wine!"

"I'm not delicate, it's my pale skin."

"No such thing. Nice clean skin of your own. What do you take George for—do you suppose he's all spiritual eyes? But to be picking and choosing other people's sins for them, and then sitting down to judge 'em!"

"Any way, George doesn't judge harshly."

"I don't say he does," said Jasper gloomily. "George is full of consideration for sinners (confound him)," he muttered—"when his mind is disengaged."

He glanced sharply at Joan.

"If George had a spark of common sense you'd be enjoying yourself this minute, as light and happy as a grig," he rapped out.

A whole flock of amazed questions flew at him from Joan's eyes, but for a minute she said not a word. "Truthful girl that," mused Jasper.

"But," she said at last, deeply flushed, "if George

wasn't happy—if he wasn't radiantly, beautifully happy as he is now—if——”

“You can be happy enough on a kindly earth if you haven't a bee in your bonnet.”

Joan went over and poured some cream into his coffee.

“This is my first party,” she said, laughing sweetly, her hand on the back of his chair. “If you're longing all the time for bitter beer and making remarks in your own mind about George, you'll quite spoil it.”

“Well, indeed, my girl, I'd be sorry to spoil anything so agreeable,” he said kindly. “You're a rare hostess, and I haven't had such a breakfast for a twelve month.”

His upturned face looked wrecked, blood-shot, and extremely sinful.

That he must—inevitably must—be an abiding blister upon such a heart as George's, who could wonder?

Withal it comforted her to see him so clean and straight and with so royal a head. So she made a firm resolution sooner or later to open his sealed eyes to the full beauty of George.

But in the meantime she sat down again and talked brightly of roses and their weird visitors, her cooking experiments and the crops, carefully excising all irritants from her speech.

“Now I suppose you'll be busy,” he said at last, moving regretfully, “and I'll have to go.”

“I'll be busy, but you needn't go for ever so long yet. I'll sew and you can smoke—see! I'll fill your pipe. Now—are you comfortable?”

And so for a long time they talked and were silent, like trusty friends, and presently Joan looked up out of a long silence.

“I was reading the other day,” she said, “about Fra Angelico and the pictures he used to paint and put everywhere in the cells and corridors of St. Mark's. Nothing would induce him to take money for his pictures or to seek for fame by them. He just worked for the glory of God, and to point the way to God. He wanted to make the way to Him so lovely and shining and compelling that people simply had to follow it.”

“Hem!” said the Squire.

“He had the most extraordinary notions about things,”

said Joan, her eyes fixed to her neat stitches. "He wouldn't paint from models because he thought it wrong to paint from the human body. And looking at God he seems to have forgotten rather to look at Nature, for lots of the things he painted were wrong and out of drawing; some of his mistakes seem to have been rather ludicrous. But when Michael Angelo saw his pictures hidden away in dim passages, he said that this man must surely have seen the faces of the Saints in Paradise."

Jasper had taken his pipe out of his mouth, and Joan grew hot under his astounded eyes.

"I'm going to tell you a secret," she said, sewing diligently. "It's George's, but he said I might tell you. He's been writing some poems now for a long time—one long one, and several shorter. I don't know enough of things to be quite sure—but I know enough not to be the least surprised if George has made just the same sort of mistakes that Fra Angelico did—in another sort of way, of course. But when men—men like Michael Angelo, with hearts and brains and knowledge," she said, an odd stillness in her voice and face and breathing—nothing seemed to move except her quick ceaseless fingers—"when they read the—the things, they'll say too that George must have seen the faces of the Saints in Paradise."

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated George's father feebly.

"That sort of writing wants time and quietness," said Joan with quaking heart, "so we've decided that as we couldn't keep going out, we'd better say so at once, and not begin. So we went the other day to those three"—she nodded at the invitations. Jasper had seen them, well-pleased, and meant to let the children have the small brougham for their routs—"and told them."

Jasper lifted himself to his legs.

"But you—you're not writing a poem, too, are you?" His big voice rose to a chastened roar.

Joan shook her head mutely.

It seemed to her that one poem in a family was quite enough.

Jasper struggled frankly with his receding courtesy.

"You've entertained me finely, my girl, as one to the manner born. I'd be sorry to offend ye. But the—the—hysteria of the frocked man has an unpleasant savour in

the nostrils of healthy persons. I'll take a ride on it and see what that does. George throwing up position, neighbourliness, every spark of right feeling for the sake of a batch of snivelling Hymns! Lord, Lord, if George is in want of a mortification of the flesh—which certainly surprises me——” he paused to beat a tattoo on the mat with his elegant malacca, “why not wear a hair shirt three days a week, or do without gravy? I've known that last experiment tried, apparently to the entire satisfaction of the modern martyr, to judge by his slithery air of self-satisfaction. Two wholesome young people making exhibitions of themselves before the County. Anchorite antics! Pshaw!”

“When you read the things you'll know they're worth—everything.”

“I've met poets, God help me! child, before you were born, and suffered from 'em. Damned if a man can be biting down on things till his teeth crack,” he muttered. “Good-bye, my girl, good-bye,” he said, seizing his hat.

Joan put down her work, and followed, to find him bolt upright on the door-step gulping down language. “You're feeding George out of a pap-bowl, the lot of you,” he cried, swinging round on her accusingly. “Giving up everything for poetry! Damn selfishness, I call it. Poetry! How's a girl in love to judge. Who's to say it's not tommyrot—Damn presumption!”

“David was just as presumptuous when he wrote the Psalms.”

“David!” he roared, “comparing him with David, is she? Good Lord! David, I would have you to know, had a very different record from George's. You're forgetting your history, my girl. So far as I ever heard, David didn't begin to preach and prophecy with a boy's pink still on his cheeks. He slung stones at giants, and played the fiddle. And—did things he'd best have left undone—perhaps. Any way he took a thorough good look round before he sat down to sift his experiences and turn the lessons learnt from them to the glory of God. You must experience before you can explain. David suffered and—why, yes, sinned in a manly reasonable way before he took to poetry. He honestly enjoyed himself in fact.

"That's it," murmured this aged moralist dreamily under his breath, but Joan heard him transfixed and awed.

"That's the secret," he pursued. "If you sin like a grave-digger, of course, or for profit, why might as well be totting up figures on a stool. Land wants manuring, I tell you, before it will give out of its best."

"I've heard of wonderful things growing in virgin soil," said Joan, softly.

"Slovenly profusion—red-hot adjectives—high falutin' femininity—I know the thing. Hullo, girl! Sit down, you look tired.—Slim as a willow wand," he muttered, "and to be bucketting after George. Here, sit on this bench."

"I'm not the least atom tired."

"You soon will be then. I can see George's game. Don't tell me," he groaned, "that it's all spirit with George, there's—there's a lot of solid muscle under it. There's nothing but the Army that'd cool George's heels, he should be teaching a squad of Tommies six o'clock drill, after he had 'em up all night cleaning buttons; poor devils! But you. Why it's like an eagle putting a poor little wren through her paces."

Joan laughed shakily. She stood up still half laughing, her arms crossed quaintly over her breast.

"I think we're getting to understand each other rather well, you and I," she said in a pretty straight way she had, "but——" she paused, with a little swallowing sound, "but I don't think either of us altogether understands George. We're not Michael Angelos—exactly—you and I. His religion is a—a grand epic poem—and he can always march to it. Sometimes *now* I wonder how he can—*always*——" she stopped for a minute. "I usen't to wonder. I think once I did understand. But," she said hurriedly, her eyes still steady upon Jasper's, "even if we don't understand him, we're prouder of George than of anyone else in the whole wide world. If I couldn't be as proud of George as I am—and just in the way that I am—I don't know—I don't really know what I should do."

"Good-bye, my little girl, good-bye," said Jasper.

And for a full five minutes he felt as though he hadn't a swear in him.

CHAPTER X.

SIN, pathetic in its unsuggestive dullness, no spring in it, no growth-producing recoil, had been trodden now for many generations into the souls and bodies of George's scattered flock. They had lived for many generations sheltered from any poignant Public opinion; they had few wants and many amenities—the common for cows, the right to grow potatoes upon the peaty soil by the edges of a great marsh. And sodden were they all with a base content.

A long succession of vicars wrapped in cloaks of charity had winked mildly at many a sordid scandal and gone a junketting. And then George came, and plunged like a young god into the dead waters.

Nothing daunted him, neither sloth nor slumber, nor content—not even the cramping pettiness of the area that comprised his duty—the mere handful of souls it was for him to arouse from their comfortable sleep and set a-soldiering. He was after all only a subaltern in the field, and must be content with the paltriness of his command. So far he had found it quite enough for his patience and his powers, for even from clods he chose to demand at least mechanical perfection, and obedience, promptness, discipline are hard nuts to crack for the minds of clods; but such perfection George would have. Poet he might be in the red of the dawn and the black of midnight; saint as he stood before the Altar or alas! looked at Joan. But stout soldier was he amongst his wobbling squad. There was no uncertain sound in George's commands; they could, on the contrary,

snap like pistol shots. "Once get their shoulders up and their chests out, and I'll think of the rest!" he said. And so he drilled them, drilled them, drilled them, spared nothing, condoned nothing, throwing his heart broad cast into the crowd, surprised after its long torpor into a gaping attention.

Nor did George cast pearls before swine; he knew better. These he kept for the three hours wherein he lived, high up on Pegasus, Joan's breath upon his cheek.

But the Parish was his recruiting ground; Church the grand Parade; God the highest in Command.

As a spur to honest effort on the part of his startled recruits George spent every penny he could lay hold upon in lighting Thryng and the outlying hamlets, and in revolutionizing the quality of the beer. Oil lamps glared everywhere upon youth agog for sin—there were no dark corners any longer to hide skulkers and the madness bred of bad malt.

The astute old Squire in his secret soul applauded these moves of George's. But he was too proud to help, and George being too proud to ask for help, the Vicarage household often went next to penniless for a month of Sundays.

Theoretically the political economy of George was sound to the core. He had read wide and deep on the subject, and held the result stored and labelled in the business corner of his brain to be applied to erring vestrymen drastically. The people, it was clear enough, should pay for these spurs to a higher morality. But while he was battering proven theories into wooden heads, the Church would be filling with hasty marriages and a few more women set a-weeping.

George could break audaciously through any theory to make a point. The theory would be working itself towards perfection in the leisurely way of theories, but he must be getting on and himself pay the piper until those whose business it was were stung to action.

Being constantly short of cash George frankly admitted wasn't especially agreeable, but it was all in the day's work, and no matter what fell short his goal was always ahead of him; a star by night, a pillar of cloud by day.

It was this—this and Joan that made George scent

sweetness in a cess-pool of iniquity—sight wisdom through a forest of folly.

Moreover, he had a mighty constitution. Although he despised nothing, and had an hereditary palate for wine, he could laugh at a bare board and eat cheese like any ploughman.

Joan on the contrary could boast of no particular physique. She had been brought up under the wing of a gentleman with chilled passions but a warm palate, and had acquired an ineradicable distaste for cheese. But since the very maids smiled indulgently as they munched their beerless meals, an antipathy so gross and carnal seemed to the vicar's wife to rise up and smite her in the face. She hid the abhorred morsels of cheese in her handkerchief and choked down her bread.

It must not be supposed that George took either priggish or gloomy views in regard to the pleasures of common mortals. Any delight that came his way he took with zest for the moment, and straightway forgot it.

His real living was elsewhere, and could at any moment throw any other memory into shade ; as the red victorious, ardent sun will shine back into obscurity the pale cold glimmer of the moon.

George had the spark of genius to buoy him up, moreover, and the magnetic fascination of a great and growing personal influence—and he had Joan!

When he went forth amongst his people or came back laden with sheaves for the building up of his High Altar there she was ready and right.

Her very presence set him alight with a spiritual passion, and when sometimes the great Darkness fell even upon his bright soul Joan's luminous face could soon light it up again.

Above all the imagination of George was safe in Heaven.

It was quite different with Joan. When any pleasures came her way she ardently longed for more, and her imagination roved from Dan to Beersheba all along the pleasant earth. She loved her friends, thought gently of her enemies, and was anxious to do her best for everyone, but to Influence anyone would seem quite beyond her beat.

Before George's amazing dependence upon her, indeed, she sometimes stood aghast, wondering wide-eyed how he could possibly accredit her with such powers. At the same time she knew that by looking at George she really did often make quite swift sure little runs to the truth. So with emphatic gravity she accepted the situation.

She unflinchingly adored George, but it seemed to her that she had really no natural taste for doing good, and she loved amusing herself.

There was no murmur of discontent in Joan, but she suffered badly from a great sense of unworthiness.

And even now when the excitement and glamour of her engagement, with all its sacro-sweet accessories, had sifted down into matrimony, she had plenty of pleasures in a quiet way apart from George. George's father enthralled her; his wife's vague melancholy attracted and repelled her: to be in a fir wood was a perennial delight—she would run half a mile out of her way to drink in the fragrance of the great pines, and yet not keep a mother's meeting waiting!

And the roses! Ah! the roses were the joy of Joan's heart. Her pure creamy, quiet face seemed most at home amongst her roses. There seemed the oddest, quaintest fellowship between the living coolness of her face and the living warmth in their red hearts. She touched roses as though they were babies. And although outside visitors soon slacked a little in their fruitless attentions, Beatrice had fallen into the habit of bouncing in at odd hours. Joan was rather nice in the way she could always account for Billy. When that gentleman became really too awful for words Joan somehow made him more bearable—generally by what she didn't say. And when there was nothing else going on, Beatrice found it a distraction to watch the way in which good works were put through. George's wife was so practical and matter of fact, so eminently cut out for the business, and yet not devoid of points. Her eyes would light up in the most amusing way about the most trivial things.

"Heaven and George and all that!" said Beatrice, with a spasm of good-natured envy, "are awfully becoming—wish to goodness we could do it. Being in the world but not of it has enormous advantages really."

Beatrice, as time went on, began rather to enjoy showing her little sister-in-law off in character. She would burst in on her way back from hunting with a crowd of healthy, laughing young people clamouring for tea, and Joan's eyes would dance fairly out of her head as she looked out from the porch upon the careless light-hearted crowd, shouting gaily as they went. They seemed not to trouble under any circumstances to lower their merry voices.

Beatrice upon these occasions always took it upon her to assume the office of show-woman to the family Church Property.

"She's ripping amongst under-linen," she explained one day airily to a mixed audience, as Joan poured out the tea. "Fearfully and wonderfully made things that set your flesh creeping to touch them. And you should see her at a mother's meeting! Any man-jack of us would give her eyes for Joan's way with the creatures, you'd think it wicked waste to be lavishing such gifts on old women if you didn't see how awfully they like it—like it, anyway as much as the poor luke-warm beasts can like anything."

"Think of being tepid for eighty years," interrupted a resonant young voice.

"And then to be tucked away on the weather side of the Churchyard under those sodden Alders," screamed another.

"It does sound hopeless," Beatrice admitted cheerfully, pausing to glance at Joan. "But if you go into it heart and soul it really seems to go with a swing—and it's awfully interesting to watch. Loving your neighbour as yourself is very becoming too, and lets loose all sorts of hidden graces. It's hating him like poison that makes hay of your manners."

To interrupt Beatrice till she had done was hopeless, but here she seemed to halt, so Joan struck in, "Beatrice," she implored, "your tea is getting cold and so are the cakes."

"Isn't she practical?" demanded Beatrice, in a general sort of way.

Joan had seen Mrs. Jarley's wax-works once at a Parish Tea and felt dreadfully like one of the figures. She laughed, but her eyes flashed out a protest.

"I don't think it's fair to any of us," pursued Beatrice,

"that you should be lost as an object-lesson—I'll bring them some day to one of the old women's teas or something."

"I don't perform for the public," said Joan, with an effort retaining her serenity.

Beatrice clapped her hands delightedly.

"She won't have her old women laughed at, won't she? But, Joan, even if we wanted to we couldn't laugh," she said. "It's quite like a prayer to watch you, it really is. One wants to walk on tip-toe you know, or go out in the twilight with Browning's poems, you know—or look at the moon—by yourself, that sort of thing, you understand."

"Here are more hot cakes," pleaded Joan.

"The other night I came home full to the brim of good resolutions," said Beatrice, her mouth full of hot cake. "I was firmly set on doing something for somebody. I couldn't find anyone else so I fell upon Billy. He said he had a headache, and I daresay it was true. Just now he's smoking the vilest tobacco. I made him lie down, and I read him a story of Bret Harte's that Joan had been reading to the old women. When she read it, it sounded like a blessing you know. When I read it, if you'll believe me it began to swear! And indeed so did Billy. Then I tried the Bible; it's like a poem to hear Joan read the Bible. I found a piece—the most beautiful sonorous language you ever heard, about burying a man with the burial of an ass outside the City walls, and—Billy snored."

"I'm thankful to say I did," said Billy scornfully.

"And yet you've been at Oxford, and Joan's old women can't read. Oxford seems a hopeless place to send a primitive intellect to. In sweeping in a smattering of knowledge it apparently sweeps out every vestige of faculty for appreciating it. I wonder, Billy, how you'd have shown up as an unlettered pauper?"

Billy grunted. His wife's words never disturbed him so long as her voice was genial, but he cast an awe-stricken glance at the Parochial Figure-head seething with foreign emotions, a knowledge of the real nature of which would have turned him grey on the spot, his notions of Joan being wholly transcendental.

"The poor would make me limp in no time, I know," mused Beatrice. "I wonder what makes the difference in people. Really, you'd think sometimes to look at Joan that she had an electric light in her inside."

"Oh! Beatrice, don't! It sounds like a disease," cried distracted Jóan.

"It *is* too bad," admitted Beatrice, "but I really didn't intend to be flippant. It's too horribly interesting to have that Middle-Ages sort of enthusiasm at work actively in your own family. You can't do justice to it in common words somehow. I never think of you and George but I want to be talking Chaucerise—after journalise—you know."

"Won't any one have some more tea?" said Joan desperately.

"Girls," cried the omnivorous Beatrice, plunging back upon the world. "Suppose we arrange finally now about the tableaux. Billy, we don't want you. Your generalizations are of too violent a type. Details fly like chickens before your great stable-broom of a mind. Go and tell Joan about those diagrams you're going to give her for the Infant School. Just for five minutes we'll be wallowing in pure worldliness."

"It's like being a leper," thought Joan. "It makes you feel so—so ugly."

Billy mumbled along gingerly about the Infant School, but Joan's ears listened only for the laughter of the others.

That very morning for three destroying hours, had the infants been choking her with their own peculiar fumes. She was deadly, deadly, deadly sick of infants.

She liked the poor little things—she did truly like them, she protested mutely, till their scent seemed regularly to settle down in her, and even then she tried to be nice to them, truly, truly she did.

But the laughter and colour of the girls excited her, their audacity, their flashing rings, the wicked waste in their clothes, even their reckless adjectives attracted her immensely; and she seemed to be most horribly alive, to be burning up with life; and she was to live, it would appear, only just in little permitted bits. She wanted to shout out everything as those girls did, not just the

little right things. Her tongue was just as sharp with merriment as theirs. And here they were all fencing her in and expecting her to perform miracles for their entertainment.

"They're snipping little bits off me," she thought, "and if they go much longer like this there will be nothing left but a pair of cutting-out scissors and—and—a prayer," she added. A hasty trip of which she repented at bitter leisure.

"It's not fair even to the infants," she thought catching the gist of Billy's discourse vaguely. "I do love the poor little things—whenever I possibly can."

A rich, rolling peal of laughter drove Billy and the infants clean out of her mind; she gave out a little sharp cry.

"By Jove!" said Billy, stepping back horrified.

Joan looked at him, and all at once it struck her that it would be a real comfort to speak out to something human that couldn't possibly understand her.

"It's a horrid way I've got into when I've been thinking about anything—*violently*, you know"—she said, laughing half nervously, "it's so much harder to think under your breath than to act under it," she explained apologetically, "and sometimes before I know what I'm at I find myself shouting."

"Yes," said Billy doubtfully, "like us when we swear, only I couldn't imagine you swearin'."

"I could," said Joan thoughtfully. "But I don't always want to be swearing. I just want to get rid of a lot of abominable silence that seems to be clogging me up."

Words were silly things, and yet she could not be silent any longer, and any more infants were absolutely out of the question.

"Listening to people laughing is rather exciting, don't you think?" she ventured tentatively.

He glanced dubiously at the hilarious group.

"Women laugh at such fooleries."

"But fooleries are part of real living?"

There was some struggle going on in Billy's kind dog's eyes. It resulted in a painfully sincere stammer.

"I say, you're a real good sort, don't y' know. I've sus-

pected as much this long time, only naturally one—" Billy swallowed what seemed to be a tidy mouthful of something. "You see one fights shy of another saint in the family. George pretty nearly did for us when he started; but now I'm beginnin' to understand you better, you see. You're such miles ahead of the lot of us in that sort of way that you can afford to be lenient. It's like this, you know. If a fellow's legs have no grip in 'em, you understand? and he gives at the wrists—some chaps are made like that," he said apologetically; "you wouldn't think of deridin' him, you know, because he can't ride like one that has the right make."

Billy left the application and completion of his illustration to the lady's superior intelligence, and mopped his brow.

"Oh! Billy," she cried, with a shy, merry laugh; "you don't understand one bit. That's not it in the very least. I have the make. My legs have got grip in 'em. That's just it! I'm just exactly like everyone else—only—only more so. Do you understand?"

"By Jove!" He stared at her thoughtfully. "I'm hanged if I do—but I'm not afraid of you any longer, any way—and—it's a blessin' I can tell you. Been somethin' awful—often."

She seized his arm and shook it. "If you ever dare to be afraid of me—I'll—I'll—Oh! never mind! Shall we go back to the infants now?"

"Hang the infants!" said Billy, encouraged by such unhoped for urbanity, his dreamy gaze still fixed upon her.

"Wasn't it an odd thing that I was the first to suspect what George was after," he hazarded. "We were out schoolin' one day, and he let the Squire's brown mare down in a rabbit hole. I saw then that George was up to no good. You can't handle blood and be nagging at your own soul at the same time. Good Lord! I forgot—I'm most awfully sorry."

Joan laughed. "You can always forget when I come in," said she, "but I don't think you need forget that George put you all in the shade when he went hunting."

"Forget," he groaned, "I wish to the Lord one could, then the other thing wouldn't make you feel so bad."

Joan grinned inwardly, but a feeling of guilt surged up within her.

"The Infants," she murmured meekly.

"Infants!——" he paused to go over her carefully. "I say, you'd look well mounted. I'd like to teach you ridin', and to show 'em what you can do."

"Oh!" cried Joan, her face like a pale flame. "But the time? I have so little."

"Can you get up early?"

"Of course."

"I'm trainin' now, and up at five, mornings lengthenin' out you see, to be after the men. Can you meet me at half past six in the paddock at the back of the Vicarage bottom? Any skirt will do, you know. Let me see—Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. I say, don't tell George. When I've put you through your paces he'll be as proud as anyone of you—in a new sort of way." A glimmer of intelligence broke mildly through his admiring gaze. "Women like a change," he reflected, with a sigh, "even in the way you admire 'em. You should have seen George ride a steeple chase," he murmured, with sincere sympathy, "when he was all right, you know—Monday then, six-thirty sharp."

And so for weeks after that, for three delicious hours in every week, every atom of Joan tingled with life.

* * * * *

Cora, after her milder, more languid fashion, was also attracted by the unknown quantity in the Family Living. She had come down to recruit with Beatrice, and the exigencies of her situation required that she should swim round in tea-gowns, a dispensation against which her sister's robustness frequently struck. Upon these occasions the plaintive matron took refuge at the Vicarage. "Dearest Joan's mind," she said, "isn't full of worldly self-seeking, nor her house of irreverent tattling—vipers!

"It really is a comfort to be with you, Joan—just now," murmured the injured lady one day. "At a time like this one does want religion. It makes me feel somehow right to watch you busy with good works." She picked up a

piece of coarse work that Joan was hurrying to get finished, and laid it down with a slight shiver. "And I'm perfectly sure it's extremely good for the baby. I told Eustace so the other day and he laughed in such a horrid way—I don't believe Eustace has even the beginnings of a soul. He said you had ripping eyes and were a deal too good to be put to such uses, why didn't I look at the curate's wife. She squints dreadfully, poor thing, so I am always careful to be out when she calls, and if I meet her to look away. It's one's duty to think of the future, you know. But Eustace," she said, dabbing powder upon rather a red and forlorn little nose, "Eustace thinks of nothing but himself. It must feel nice to be really good. You have the best of it, dear, really. I often feel so hollow."

Joan herringboned her petticoat without comment. She was thinking that at that moment she felt rather hollow herself. They had had a most delightful leg of mutton for luncheon, so fragrant and juicy; the gross reflection stabbed Joan to the heart, but it recurred with fiendish pertinacity. The servants had other things, so George had collected the mutton and everything else on the table for a miserable burnt out family, and sent it off in a basket.

He was absolutely right; had he not done so she would have been bitterly disappointed in George. At the same time she did feel hollow in her own way, and could not help reflecting that on the whole she would greatly have preferred Cora's.

CHAPTER XI.

THE subtle progressive relentless change going on in Joan's quiet personality in regard to the mechanical acts of devotion was, in a sort of way, a variation of Miss Rebecca's parable; she seemed to see the worm everywhere, but often now failed to hear the song.

It was an incredible bruising, mute sorrow to the girl,

and she seemed powerless to prevail against the forces which opposed her.

Her enthusiasm was the first stronghold to give way to the great enemy; her interest fell next to his battering blows; finally, even her indifference yielded. She now hated with her whole strong young heart every one of the little pottering offices that swallowed up her time. The flowers set stiffly in flat sconces, stripped of religious glamour, were a parody on Nature. The reverent dustings and polishings and sweepings, formerly each a separate act of prayer, were now back-breaking toil, all smeared with the trail of a feeble and giggling femininity, introduced, too, by her own excess of zeal. This partition of holy labour had been one of her first acts of self-sacrifice. Who was she, after all, to monopolize such divine tasks? Now the slovenliness in the quality of her assistants' work appalled her; their points of view struck her dumb.

A sad and munificent lady, herself thrice widowed, by way of a wedding gift to George, had presented three palls to his parish, for the aged, the middle-aged, and the young. George, to give him his due, whilst accepting them, had grinned.

Joan, however, had adopted the things, so to speak, upon her knees.

To shake and air the sumptuous trappings of woe, seemed then to her a solemn joy unbefitting the powers of appreciation of a sexton.

Yet, alack and alack, she was weary now to her very heart of palls.

To relinquish, nevertheless, any duty assumed with such lofty beatings of heart, would have seemed to her a hideous lapse; she clung hard to her funereal labours, and to combat the wily and destroying moth in her inroads upon the rich velvet, if it no longer caused Joan's heart to quicken, at least made it very frequently burn.

This change came not through any morbid thinking out of anything, nor was it complicated with any religious doubt whatsoever. The tasks had lost their savour, but to do them perfectly left her, during the day, no time for morbidity.

In the evening, for George's sake, she had to keep her mind alert and ready for all his needs.

When she went to bed she was only too thankful to sleep, and the only thing in regard to which she presumed to doubt was her own unworthy unfitness to be the handmaiden of holy things.

Had she known that her patient, reverent, exquisite handling of her dull chores impressed her giggling helpers considerably more than George's best sermons—a living picture touching certain temperaments a deal more than any winged word, she had perhaps been less despairing.

And those hallowed hours with George; those midnight vigils of joy, when he cast aside the Parish and lived! No one knew George, really, but herself, no one! He was making ready beautifully, steadily, in unself-conscious simplicity for some unknowable greatness. Joan's belief in the ultimate George was absolute, unswerving, but into the nature of his great designs she did not dare now even to penetrate. She had lost her way. What she had to do was to watch each step of George's faithfully, so that she should be ready to answer to his every demand.

For a young woman already rather spent in multifarious labours to be every night of the week the inspiration of a man, with a great song to sing, of one whose spirit at a moment's notice can always mount and master his body, must of necessity have been a fatiguing process.

But Joan, if her foolish eyes began, owl-like, to blink, thought she was being disloyal to George.

And so she seemed all day long to be chasing dissolving views.

Whilst still in hot pursuit of a cold scent, merciful Nature sent, however, a little spell wherein to rest—and a baby. An exquisite new edition of George, and oddly enough of George's father, without a thought beyond love and warmth.

Idleness, a baby, and petted luxury combined, were almost too much for Joan. She was bewildered with joy. The baby, moreover, was the beginning of a number of new things.

Directly the Squire had become fully aware of the damned slave-driving tricks of George and had waxed audible, George's resolute young wife, without a moment's hesitation had jockeyed him into mute acquiescence. She appeared to find out all he thought and intended, and

then calmly to balk him. So Jasper had of late avoided the Vicarage, and with a view to console himself for the abstention, had been drinking lustily. He was thus indecorously occupied when the child's birth awed him into sobriety only to be cast back presently into the pit of forgetfulness by consuming anxiety upon the mother's behalf.

George, as it happened, had sent his father no direct news of the girl, and he was far too stubbornly proud to call and ascertain for himself. All the news he got filtered out through Isabella, who used the flail thus delivered into her hands with skill and discretion. Jasper's nervous irritability under the lash knew no bounds. He drank abominably, but nothing seemed to ease him.

Whilst having ruled her husband out of the field, Isabella took pleased possession of the sick-room. Her solicitude took the form mostly of warnings against acquired squint and detailed instruction in regard to the whole tale of the more usual infantile diseases. She brought chill and stress into the idle warmth, and Joan wondered wistfully why the family sinner failed to come.

"Drinking, no doubt," she thought, sad but unaccusing. "He'd better see the baby as soon as possible."

She insisted forthwith upon the nurse's bringing her pencil and paper, and scrawled weakly across the sheet: "The baby is the funniest little copy of you. Please come at once."

"George," she cried, directly he came in, "will you send this to your father. I want him to see the baby."

"My dearest——"

"Oh! not now, but to-night. He'll have time to get ready then, you see. He'll come to-morrow afternoon. George, did you send word about us, baby and me?"

"He had word, of course."

"But not direct. That wasn't the same. He's so understanding, you see," she said, returning from a short flight of memory, "that it makes him get rather hurt at things."

George said nothing; he thought somewhat dejectedly that he could wish to see his father acting more up to his reputed understanding.

"It's hard to say what you wouldn't do," said Joan, staring into the fire, "if you'd lost everything nearly, and had

lost even the wish to get it back—that's the worst of all—and kept on all the time being most wonderfully understanding."

"My father certainly understands your loving kindness," said George, after a long look at her.

"He understands a great deal more than that," said Joan. "One can say so many things when one is ill," she thought, "I think I'll go on." "He understands just exactly why you feel wrong, you know, and knows just where you'd like to go wrong—only of course you don't. It's more or less the result of being sinful, don't you think?" George started. "Oh, well! I mean when the sin doesn't somehow go through you. I don't think I could ever give way to drink," she said dreamily, after a long pause which George left undisturbed, "but there are other things." Her wistful eyes turned to George.

George laughed amusedly.

"Several," he admitted, "but I can't couple you with any of them."

Lying there in the fragrant warmth, no need to keep her wits in leash so that they could spring at any moment to George's help with the one right suggestion, the one right word, a host of vague thoughts were taking firm hold upon Joan. She could set George straight about several things in regard to her foolish self, without disturbing one single delicate beautiful thought of his or interfering with an idea. It was just the right moment—the one opportunity. She laughed softly to herself, and her eyes were full of tears. She could confess and get absolution. And then, never again could she feel lonely and outcast, or so hopelessly wrong. There was no human creature but George could put right, and this was the one single circumstance, the one single mood in which she could tell him things. If she could begin even—*he* could go on, and get things right—and get things right," she repeated, catching her breath softly. She shut her eyes for the plunge, and opened them upon George, pocket-book and pencil in hand, watching her tenderly.

"I don't suppose you're the least pretty, really, but you're more beautiful than beauty," he said, laughing, "and sweeter than sweetness, and stronger than strength, and I don't believe any one in the whole world understands you but

me. And if you lie there disabled much longer there's no knowing what folly I may not wobble into. I've got to preach a sermon on Thursday at Troom, and it's got to be as near perfect as I can make it, it's got to come right, and if your face won't put it right, nothing will. This in the one opportunity I'll have—so——” He snapped off short, and in a minute the world was forgotten, his face was rapt.

Joan huddled down in the sheets with a little gasp. “But I thought it was I that wanted putting right,” she said. “I thought it was myself, and now the sermon has got *my* moment.”

Joan hated letting things go, and it was a moment in a life-time, she thought, with odd persistence; she half lifted her head, but let it fall again limply. “To tell a man with a face like that—things, that sometimes you fairly detest—the—the altar—one simply couldn't,” she said. “Besides—how could one interrupt him *now*?”

She huddled down again tiredly.

When George threw back his head, the sermon right, she said with firm distinctness, “George, I want baby to be a soldier—I'm extremely anxious he should be a soldier. You won't mind, will you?”

“One parson in the family enough, eh? Oh, no! I won't mind. Miss Rebecca can drill him.” He stood up and looked down at her. “When did you decide upon his profession?”

“I've been thinking for some time, but just now I felt quite sure.”

“You—you look different, Joan. You seem to be looking through the firelight past me at some special horizon of your own. You're not going to cut me out of any new horizon that may arise, are you, Joan?” he asked lightly, but with an odd doubt. “It would be sure to have some new tone of blue in it that one couldn't afford to miss.”

“I haven't any horizon, I leave all that to you.”

There was still an anxious doubt in George's face. She laughed a little faintly up at him.

“I'll tell you directly I feel one—coming on. I'm—I'm tired now. Is it quite settled—about baby?” she asked, with sudden energy.

“Quite!”

Joan tried to spin out her smile, but it seemed to break off in the middle. George was elsewhere.

"I think," she whispered at last—"I think—I want something——"

"My dearest!" cried George, his hand on the bell, his horror-stricken eyes upon Joan.

When the nurse came, she flung a look at him that shrieked with the myriad thoughts of an experienced woman upon husbands.

Joan's mandate to the hall had the desired effect.

Jasper, not yet too far gone to decipher the feeble scrawl and divine its import, gave orders for his horse to be brought round by six next morning, and stumbled off to his room, the spirit-stand in his embrace. He liked to repent with a free hand. With a virtue-breathing oath, disdaining lock and key, he set it upon the table, and plunged recklessly into a cold bath.

Early the next afternoon he presented himself before Joan, erect but haggard, and took his place as worshipper before the sacred shrine, scattering Isabella.

The flight of Isabella was coeval with the advent of Miss Rebecca.

Her bearded presence was the finishing touch to Jasper's content. But for George's righteous eye he could have believed himself translated without a jerk from hell to heaven.

"The fellow's eye, however, rights the balance," he reflected humbly, "keeps my memory fresh. Needn't emphasis the value of the reminder, though, in the way he does."

George, as a matter of fact, having noticed his father's wince at sight of him, had with a most zealous effort expunged every spark of expression from his countenance, and was quite as nervous and embarrassed as the perennial prodigal himself.

Directly she had made her last protest in regard to the sacerdotal character of the wedding tour, Miss Rebecca had snapped her lips, and delivered Joan into the hands of Providence.

"A bride," she had informed Dr. Davis while he swallowed his beef-tea, "should be left to the guidance of Nature, until after the birth of her first child. Watching two human

beings making fools of themselves will never give them wisdom."

And so staunch to her principles, upon those rare occasions when Miss Rebecca bore down upon the Vicarage, she crossed her hands and controlled her temper, until she seemed frequently to be tottering on the verge of imbecility. Joan had often been seriously alarmed, and had done her best to allay the distressing symptoms. But the lady refused to budge an inch from her convictions; she sat on during her visits like a stuck pig, and permitted the creatures under observation to show their preposterous hands.

Even Joan's breathless disclosure of George's projected master-piece had elicited no more from this inexorable theorist than one ungovernable inarticulate splutter of what Joan took to be impotent wrath.

The baby, however, terminating the vow, broke the ice. The bride had now, presumably, disappeared in the mother, and Miss Rebecca, in all her pristine vigour, charged down upon the ridiculous innocents.

She would sit for hours, if permitted, the child across her arms, like an umbrella, making irreverent remarks. But in the midst of her wildest blasphemy her traitorous moustache would sometimes twitch sharply. And when Joan or the baby called for rest, she was a dragon on the hearth.

Above all she kept the cloven hoof of the parish, and higher interests outside Joan's door. Directly an echo of either appeared in George's tone, a remark as irrelevant as it was importunate, lightened the threatened air.

"Another privilege filched from you, my friend," she informed Jasper in a whisper. "Can't drink like a fish, my good man, and put down your foot on your son's soul when the occasion requires it."

Joan wandered awe-stricken whether this grateful vigilance were of accident or design, but she was too happy and lazy to track the windings of Miss Rebecca's mind.

Her circle was complete. The world went round with a soft song, and Joan lorded it finely over them all.

As Miss Rebecca and her old friend went one day down the Vicarage path, Jasper sighed deeply—

"Unless I'm vastly mistaken, Rebecca, the devil's not so very far down in that poor little girl," he remarked diffi-

dently. "She's seen visions with more purple and fine linen in 'em than hair shirts. That face of hers is a bare-faced blab. The girl's instincts are promising—only too promising," he hastened to add sadly. "It's hard on a woman to have to go shares in a man's heart, even with Heaven, eh, Rebecca?"

"A man may require a woman to go shares in his heart with more disastrous and less respectable things than Heaven," boomed Rebecca.

"She's not the girl to be fed on pure soul," he sighed. "She'll starve on the diet, like dogs on jelly. Why even when he looks at that innocent child there's a baptismal expression about him."

"Control yourself, Jasper."

"You know as well as I that a woman must have some compensation for grinding labours, and a rapt husband. If religion fail her," he groaned, "what's left, I'll ask you?"

"Philosophy or a lover."

"How in Heaven's name is she to evolve a philosophy out of George and calico smocks? As for the other thing, if George won't amuse her, no one else shall. That's plain enough in her honest eyes."

"In the interests of common decency, it's time to change the subject," said Miss Westcar.

"Oh! if you go putting on airs and graces of righteousness, Rebecca, when a man's heart is already in his boots, I'd better be cutting my throat at once. By the way, the girl knows what she's talking about. There's—the—the—making of a Bishop in that poem."

Joan had that very day insisted upon reading it aloud from beginning to end.

"If anyone but George had written it."

He lifted a deprecating stick. "Do I ever lose sight of the hopelessness of George? I feel this minute," he pursued musingly, "as though I'd been all the afternoon in the excellent and improving company of saints, angels and apostles with backbone behind 'em. Give George his due, he's not all wings, and it wasn't her reading either that made that poem poetry. Very fine and impressive to be sure, and damn good poetry, too, all of it; made you think of your death-bed. And want to take that poor girl to a ball."

"Were I you, Jasper," counselled Rebecca suavely, "I

should permit my death-bed reflections to swallow those on the ball."

"The girl's not twenty," protested Jasper.

"Look here, Jasper. You're not wholly saddened by drink—*yet*. Can't you see that the girl is being driven by two conflicting forces? Intense love and devotion for George's person and boundless faith in the greatness of his aims, with no stomach whatsoever for the details of the Heavenly path. Had he been a soldier or a sailor, or anything else upon earth it wouldn't have mattered. A man can manage his company or touts for briefs without the co-operation of his wife's soul; even an ordinary parson can do very well on his own. So long as the drudgery peculiar to clerical women is done to his satisfaction, and no especial mischief made in the parish by her tongue, he's content, good soul!"

"But what has George to do with the ordinary parson?" said Jasper irritably.

"What, indeed! There's a natural sort of holiness about George, an exhalation, so to speak; always was, due neither to ignorance nor exclusive society. He's been through the usual fires," Miss Rebecca lifted her nose, "and has lived under the shadow of *your* wing. With his father and his opportunities, it stumps me to find out whence George derived his peculiar form of spirituality—rank, dogged, jew at the bottom of it, not a trace of pagan grace. His very love had its origin in pure spirit——"

"Rotten foundation," muttered Jasper, meaning no irreverence.

"From the very start," pursued Miss Rebecca unmoved. "He's mixed Joan up so inextricably with sacred things and his highest emotions that now she's the most sacred thing of the lot. It's a misfortune for the girl; she has vast powers of enjoyment outside the legitimate domain of altars, and would appreciate immensely being the wife of a budding bishop. At the same time, in her present position she's supreme. We're all absurdly proud of George. Don't glare; the reservations surely don't need recounting. We're very proud of our boy, and without Joan at his back—a faithful well-spring of good things—upon which he draws fearlessly and without stint, I doubt if we'd have quite the same cause we now have for our artless vanity. The ques-

tion for the present is, who is to suffer? George or Joan?" She had been speaking throughout with a calmness that terrified Jasper, now her voice grew even more poignantly serene. "I don't think that George is in a condition to understand the sub-play going on in his wife. I don't think it desirable that he should understand it. It must dim the extraordinary brightness of his mind. It might spoil his work; it's wonderful work. Jasper," she said solemnly, "don't be a hypocrite. It's throbbing this minute in your rank old soul, and if it touches you, *you*, Heaven only knows what it may not attain to. And after all," she said, lifting her shaggy old head proudly, "when it's a question of the man's or the woman's suffering, and there's a choice in the matter, no woman worth her salt would think twice about it, it's she who must 'dree her weird.' It's her right and her heritage. Supposing Joan got all her youth wants, and George, or George's outlook, or George's career were hurt thereby, how do you imagine she'd feel?"

"How the devil will George feel if he wears her out before her time?"

"George won't know. *We* won't tell him."

"I'm hanged if there is not more selfishness in the spirit than in the flesh."

"It's on the surface in the spirit, so we see more of it. It's worked into the warp and woof of the flesh into every part of the body corporate."

"A man with the fervour of an early Christian should remain celibate till it works itself out."

"But since marriage has overtaken George?"

"Faugh! To enjoy peace of spirit at such a price!"

"Better than to sell it for a mess of pottage as is the way of man in the flesh. Did I want her to marry either George or Heaven? One and the same thing in her ridiculous mind. But since she's done it she must play the straight game."

"Trust a woman to give the hard job to the woman!"

"Men don't always spare them. Do you suppose I like to look at youth withering at the foot of the pulpit? At the same time, Joan may win her way to a sainthood of her own in the process."

The Squire groaned.

"Or fall into a consumption," said Rebecca, "or become ultimately merged in George."

"Merciful Lord!"

"Or be the mother of an immense family."

"For God's sake, Rebecca——"

"Or she may be just a bird with a broken wing about the house. She's not the only girl who has been lifted to Heaven by the love of a man, and dropped to earth by the demands of her youth and the details of clerical matrimony."

"And then," growled the squire, "to be called upon to aid and abet George and a whole choir of angels in tormenting one poor little girl."

"So far, Jasper, you've contributed nothing but folly to this regrettable business. Supposing you now try a little sense."

"Supposing you suggest some."

"Jasper! you're like ashes, as you richly deserve to be upon George's teeth. For this reason the girl has a real sympathetic attachment for you. You're contraband, so to speak, yet permitted. A mental pursuit enthralling, yet terrifying; a sort of coquetting with family sin. She wants a safety valve. Turn yourself into one."

"I? My dear Rebecca——"

"You may well look astonished."

"But you, my dear Rebecca——"

"A woman's unspoken confidence and unspeakable hangings will naturally drift towards a man. Happy she whose father-in-law may gather in the weird harvest."

Jasper had a scared look, but Miss Rebecca's eye showed no yielding.

"She'll take her duty, however dull it may be, keenly," she resumed. "I hope she'll take it kindly. One harsh note may undo the self-sacrifice of a life-time. I hate to see a virtue spoilt in the doing. We're the worst sinners in that respect."

"You are," said Jasper, plaintively thinking, it were hard to say why, of the moustache.

Possibly Rebecca divined the thought. Her tongue sharpened.

"Man, on the contrary, can sin with so gay a swing that

the ordinary woman, never a very keen observer, will feel sure he's being virtuous—in his own way."

It was thus it came to pass that two shameless Pagans undertook to cherish the interest of a saint.

CHAPTER XII.

JASPER was still standing aghast before the new duty imposed upon him, when another still more soul-searching fell crashing upon his unregenerate head.

Isabella Winnington had laboured ungrudgingly for the advancement and amusement of her girls, and had in no sort of way, in this regard, failed her boys. What their father's vices deprived them of in their own home, she had taken good care should be made up to them in the houses of those more worthy though less picturesque than that terrible parent.

She had been consistent, shrewd, and just, so far as she knew justice, in her unenthusiastic handling of her children, and had never spared herself.

But as for love she had buried all the love of which she was capable in the heart of young Ralph Wynne the day he was brought back to her husband's house, a little blue hole in his white forehead, his clothes unruffled, a smile that seemed still alive around his handsome mouth, for he had died as gracefully and ineffectively as he had lived. Isabella had then put away from her also all the sweet ways of sympathy.

Any outward display of affection filled her from henceforth with a strange ungovernable panic. A peculiarity her children had not been slow to discover.

Her girls, though not especially sensitive either to love or caress, when they thought at night of this strange thing, cuddled up in each other's arms. Her boys, when they had choked down the first grim acceptance of the fact, never dared to think of it at all. They got instead into the way of totting up and cataloguing the virtues of their mother.

Joan did not know enough of her virtues to tot them up, and she had a wholesome dread of the unsmiling

barrenness of her mother-in-law's nature. But whilst she lay and watched her from her bed, she had noticed an odd tottering look about the woman and her most pathetic efforts to conceal it. She had seen Mrs. Winnington go suddenly slack and as suddenly harden herself; her head drop wearily and shoot up again with a jerk, and behind her eyes there had often skulked some horrid thing that filled Joan with grisly apprehension. And all the time this sub-play went on in most insistent silence. Joan wondered drearily why she alone of them all should see and understand.

The thing haunted her, but Mrs. Winnington's horror of publicity was so pathetic, so importunate, that Joan could not betray her. Then, presently she began to wonder if, in the silence, this echoing shell of a woman, who had thrown her whole cargo of love into one old grave, might not perhaps find out her unutterable emptiness, and with that the thought of her loneliness took firm possession of Joan.

Joan's pride and confidence in her young son as a Power-house of beneficent influence was as sublime as it was staunch; no other baby born of woman had ever such miraculous gifts. If the baby couldn't help the miserable woman nothing could.

So directly she was able to walk, Joan set one hour in the day rigorously aside to carry up her small apostle to the Hall for the express purpose of regenerating his grandmother. And when she grew stronger she worked double time in order to spin this hour sometimes into two, and during her whole monotonous, silent visit was Joan uplifted with the spirit of a crusader. Her baby as Cross seemed to call forth all her forces; to awaken her to a joy in living and to a tumultuous grief. For in no sort of way, apply him as she would, could he kindle again the frozen flame of Joan herself as the official hand-maiden of Heaven.

And now the Parish held a new terror, for measles and diphtheria raged within its bounds. Joan's heart, as she stepped across each infected threshold, fell like lead, and she was fairly chevied by a faithless-shepherdess sensation of a most distressing order. In this matter George held himself entirely aloof. He had watched the struggle

going on in the unquiet eyes of the quiet mother with tender sympathy, and when he sighted victory, in silence he blest God and his incomparable wife. George's oneness with the spiritual part of Joan had become so much second nature with him that to speak out of his pride in her would have savoured of pride in himself. Besides that Joan should fail where he would prevail, did not enter into George's conception of things. It would have been an insult to Joan.

There was beauty in so proud a reticence, so staunch a belief, but in the case of a young mother with a first child such loftiness of emotion were, perhaps, better fitted to a deathless Heaven than a mortal earth.

To give George his due his heart revealed itself often at night in certain exquisite, tender suggestions, quick with strong humanity, which he set like jewels in the Great Work. But it never struck Joan to associate this delicate, radiant genius of deathless thought with herself and diseases.

George saw all her struggles; the quiet fight of the strong, sweet, transparent soul was one of the object lessons of his life. Nothing escaped him. Where he went hopelessly wrong was in the resulting exaltation of spirit which he made sure so exquisitely matched his own. The exaltation in his pure mind being the natural sequence to the struggle.

George, in the contemplation of his own privileges, experienced a throbbing pity for those unequally yoked wretches with wives standing contented amongst pots and pans outside the closed portals of their lonely husbands' spirits and minds.

But what can one expect? After all even a *fleshly* man half intoxicated with creative power is half blind.

And what the wives of the prophets may not have suffered during those great men's periods of inspiration can only be imagined.

Joan, meanwhile, after a hard and inadequate morning, amidst Altar decorations, the Poor, Schools and underlinen, often longed for the time when she could sit down idle and watch her wonderful infant doing *her* work.

She could see the spread of his unparalleled influence in the loveless Subject's every feature.

It cannot be denied that at the outset of this unparalleled onslaught upon her buried heart the Subject had restively wondered and fumed. This persistent visitation struck a proud spirit as being somewhat of a liberty. She had not invited the presence either of mother or child, her black eyes shot out imperious questions; but the odd storm of eagerness behind Joan's chestnut ones, as they glanced from her to the baby, faintly interested Mrs. Winnington, and in the end disarmed her.

It must, moreover, be a daily annoyance to Jasper to know the girl to be in the house and yet be debarred, through his satanic pride, from the enjoyment of her society.

His liking for George's wife had always exasperated Isabella, and it was nice to feel again the clasp of a child's hand.

Joan made neither demand nor demonstration; stillness and silence seemed part of her atmosphere; so presently Mrs. Winnington, on whom there often came now a curious apathy, a cloudiness, left her daughter-in-law and fixed all her attention upon the baby. He seemed easy, restful, free of the veriest shadow of a suspicion.

For the first time since that day which broke her, Mrs. Winnington seemed to escape from the dead, cold, imprisoned air that had slowly been choking her. Curious little stirrings began to flutter about her weary breast, little pangs and pricks and queer promptings of small things now but dimly remembered, took hold of her and held her. Sometimes she straightened herself, took up her knitting, and tried to sort these things out. But they grew confused in her mind, she had to beat her way through them, she grew tired. Counting stitches was becoming difficult, her deft fingers clumsy. Baffled and a little mortified she always threw down her work and went back to the baby. He was easy—easy.

She had never been happy enough to suffer foolishness, and had strongly repressed it in her own children, but now it seemed to come to her. Odd, gay little follies came dancing up whence only God knows, and having uttered them she would smile a little and throw a glance at Joan, half challenge, half enquiry; but Joan was

obviously engaged with other things. With a sigh of relief Mrs. Winnington would go back to the baby.

The oddest thing of all was the way in which the tired woman lost her weariness and grew young.

Joan was breathless with interest, and prouder than ever of her baby.

One day Mrs. Winnington was playing as usual with the child, his little fingers pattering her palm, when suddenly she clutched the little fist in a fierce clasp, stopped half way in a rhyme, her mouth rigid and drawn. Her moveless eyes glittered like glass balls, then slowly dulled.

Joan lifted her clenched fingers from the little hand tenderly, and they carried poor twisted Boadicea to bed.

And now came Jasper's turn. He was horribly compunctious, remained rigorously sober, and did solemnly all that he was ordered to do. And when she got up again, all in knots, dumb, but with sharpened hearing and her intelligence by no means blotted out, by gesture and gesticulation, she gave her family to understand that when Joan and the baby arrived as usual, Jasper must also answer to the roll. Jasper, only too painfully anxious to oblige, appeared prompt to the moment. By another effort of will Isabella called for the Bible, laboured patiently with twisted elbow and one sad clawed hand in and out the sacred pages, picking upon divers passages, stringent with judgment and red-hot with the perils of strong waters and the hideous sin of revenge. These she gave Joan distinctly to understand were to be read aloud unswervingly. And as Joan read the poor palsied head wagged in emphasis.

Day after day did this dreary farce go on. The ingenuity of the woman in choosing poignant portions appeared to grow with use. Her selections had a fiendish adaptability and evinced a deathly wit. There was a significance, grotesque, amazing in the punctuation of the wagging head.

Joan read in agony, with a hideous disposition to laugh. George and the rest stood around in horrid inaction with flushed faces and breaking hearts. Jasper wilted visibly under the strain.

But the baby chuckled and crowed on merrily, and one

day he again caught and held the attention of the sick woman. Of a sudden she forgot her vengeance and turned all that was left of her to the child.

But the horrid exaltation removed, she now kept dropping back into apathy; jerking herself with fierce tenacity into semi-consciousness, till once after a long, close look at the child a flash of lucidity glittered in her dulled eyes.

She made frantic half-animal gestures for a pencil and scrawled some words on the fly leaf of the Bible. It was the nearest paper available, and the hurry of the woman was maniacal.

Forthwith an unspeakable look of disgust spread slowly upon her dreadful face, and when the night fell she died.

When Joan put the Bible into Jasper's hands, she was slipping hurriedly away, but an inextinguishable groan brought her timidly back.

"Read it," said he, clutching her hand.

"Tell the child I was innocent." Joan read out after a close look.

"My God! I never thought she was anything else—in that regard," groaned the old man, "though every one else did. God help her. I tried to tell her once that I believed in her—so far—but she shut me up. She's refused to open the subject for six-and-twenty years to me or to any other human being, and silence in a woman spells guilt to all the other women.

"I did my best to clear her before the world," he cried, jumping to his feet. "By God, I did. Where was the use? She shut her lips and defied the world. Her pride broke her. Silent for six-and-twenty years and a baby to open her lips at last!"

The old man rocked to and fro, blanched, and broken.

"My girl," he began, "my girl—my girl——" The words came thick and halting. The veins swelled and blackened in his livid forehead.

Then with a supreme call upon his great strength he forced himself to his feet, and erect, and in a clear voice made humble confession to the little white girl trembling before him. He told her how Isabella, having broken his life, he had broken hers. Broken it by a silence as

implacable as her own. "She died of silence," he said, "of her own silence and mine. And I've been thinking things over lately. I meant to tell her again that I believed in her after all—and to make her understand too. And now——!"

"Sit down," said Joan, pulling him back to his seat.

He was old now and livid; she dared not leave him.

"Ah!" he said at last huskily. "Think of a silence of six-and-twenty years for one poor woman! I wonder if it's impious to thank God that her soul is at last at rest."

"It's not impious in the least," said Joan in her prosaic way. "It's common humanity."

"For a woman to go under and leave nothing but a bad taste in the mouth, and yourself the cause of it!" he groaned.

"There were other causes at work," said Joan sturdily.

Jasper mused on mournfully. "They were a cruel dispensation for the lot of us, those readings," he muttered, "for you above all; you're a little brick, girl. And don't mistake me, I don't regret them. She enjoyed herself thoroughly these last few days. Seems a pity she should be cut off in the midst of it. I doubt if she'd enjoyed herself properly for six-and-twenty years. And she rabid for every pleasure she could snatch!"

"You haven't eaten a thing, to-day," said Joan quietly. "I'm going to get you something, and afterwards you wouldn't feel half so awful, if you'd come into the drawing-room where we're all sitting. Some sorts of sorrow," she said shyly, "make one want to huddle together like sheep so as to get warm again. And—and, oh! aren't you glad I brought baby?"

"I think I must stay a little longer alone," said Jasper sadly. "It's time, I think, you'll allow, my girl, that I did begin to think a bit."

CHAPTER XIII.

JASPER'S thinking being honest, straight, and simple, resulted in action that made on the whole for righteousness.

To hold himself in constant readiness for clerical society now called forth all his powers. He shut his teeth upon his gnawings and, puffing and blaspheming, as he only too audibly resisted the devil, frequently performed prodigies of valour.

There were indeed lapses.

Occasionally he stumbled in upon Joan with flushed face, every thought a whirl, and in his language a tendency to the picturesque. But the calm, unaccusing, resolute way in which Joan plied him with coffee and went on with whatsoever she happened to have in hand, had an amazingly sobering effect upon Jasper.

Joan's calm upon these distressing occasions, was, however, only a surface one. During the whole processes of the Squire's recovery she sat on tenterhooks lest George should come in and be jarred by so gross a spectacle.

Oddly enough Jasper's feelings in regard to the importance of saving George's feelings were in theory precisely similar to those of Joan.

For days following upon any misadventure Jasper would appear upon the scenes baldly, blatantly sober, a subscription which he invariably lacked courage to present until long after the sacrificial period had elapsed, tucked carefully away upon his person.

Joan's methods of bringing retribution to the aged sinner were peculiarly her own.

"The little girl says nothing," thought miserable Jasper,

"but she keeps the child away. No one but a woman knows how to punish sin properly."

Since nothing, however, but a sight of Joan would keep his dead wife's dreadful, silent acceptance of her reputed guilt at bay, he spent long hours at the Vicarage, and bitterly as he resented George, was fast becoming possessed of Joan's passionate admiration of his son's really remarkable influence upon any one he came across. There seemed to be cleansing in the very touch of George, and as Jasper shrewdly discerned by the help of Joan he was now, day by day, untying the bands of a multitude of new powers.

George's sermons had always been suffered gladly by his congregation, whom the precariousness of crops and huntin gprospect preserved from the sin of criticism, but they had been for a long time past now a steady torment to himself. He gave out the worst of the things in him, he guiltily reflected, in those barren discourses, powerless for good or for evil. Set against the thoughts and words that lived, groaning and rejoicing in his evening's work, they were hopeless, these sermons.

George was inexorable in regard to himself, practising unselfishness as he understood it. He had honest and anguished intentions of throwing up the one exultant joy of his life, his literary work, and falling back upon the claims of grinding duty. True he was quite wide-eyed enough to know perfectly well that the sermons were well up to the locality's mark, and eminently suited to the understanding of his hearers, but they were good enough neither for God nor for him. They fell short in fact of being as good as he could make them.

George could be as reticent about his own struggles as he was about Joan's. But being a woman Joan followed his fight through all its windings, and when the right emotional moment seemed to her to have arrived, plunged headlong into its midst.

She chose the time when George was making ready for his night's work, and she herself was not yet tired.

"George," said she, nodding at the MSS. upon which George's eyes were gloating, "you're thinking of giving up that for the sermons. If you do you'll only be spoiling both."

"I've been swearing aloud then after all?" said George, laughing.

"No, you've been wonderfully artful, but I've been watching you, and I do believe I've found out where the things go wrong," said Joan, struggling with the invertebrate back of a very odorous school-book. "You see you oughtn't to write down the things you say. Just think them out and then say them. When you write them down you keep trying to make them suit the place and the people, and your conscience and common-sense. There's not flame or fire enough about common-sense to take the—the, oh, you know, the chillness out of spiritual things."

George's startled eyes anxiously raked her; she looked even more right than usual.

"You must throw spiritual things into a song, you know, so that they make melody in people's hearts; or you might just as well," she said prosaically, "be reading extracts from the *Times*. You cut all the bits of *you* out of the written sermons, don't you see, because you think they're egotistical and impertinent. They may not be common sense," said Joan serenely, "those bits of you, but they're the bits of genius that make the difference—they truly are. But I can't explain it, I get mixed. There! Stand up now, and preach to *me*!" cried Joan, with a laugh and a flash from her ruddy eyes.

"But——" he hesitated, laughing also in his boyish sensitive way.

"Go on," she commanded, sitting erect in her chair.

A sudden eager resolve not to disappoint her luminous laughing face surged up in George. He struck out boldly and the words that had baffled him that morning, and left Joan wondering that a man and his words should be such worlds apart, now grew gradually out into an idyll to pierce hearts. When he had finished Joan stood up slowly, and threw out her arms as she always did in moments of ungovernable emotion.

"Oh, yes! That's it, now you can do anything—not with the people here—they're content, but now you can do anything with people who aren't content."

"But—but I could always preach to you—if you looked like that."

She sat down and paused to daub a back on a book

and then said with outward composure, and a mighty tempest of revolt within, "Then I'll always look like that!" And in the most ridiculous way in the world she felt as though she were signing her soul away. She patted and coaxed the linen in her prim way into the crinkly crevices of the wobbling book back, then suddenly, with a swift bird-like movement, she threw down the book and jumped up.

"George! George! George!" she cried, seizing his arm. "This is all very well for you, but think of me. You'll not go leaving me behind, will you? You'll not go standing on hill-tops, oh! you know—alone with God, and leaving me at the bottom alone—in that case it would be alone with the devil, I think."

"My very dearest——"

"If I can't keep in step with you—if some day I got deadly, deadly, deadly sick of the whole business—I do seem to have an absolutely furious way of getting to hate things—yet, if I'm still able to—to trim your lamp, you know, you'll keep on loving me in this sort of way? George! you will? It seems to be the very rightest thing about me, don't you see, this way of loving me? It—keeps us together and it—it terrifies me to death."

"My darling Joan," cried poor George.

"If—something happened and I couldn't even trim your lamp? If I lost the way; or you got above it—Oh! George, then——"

"My heart of hearts, you're the well-spring of all the good there is in me. Sometimes, God forgive me, I put you before Him. When I seem most to be serving Him, I'm beset with a doubt lest it's you I'm trying to be worthy of." For a moment or two he anxiously watched her face, but as usual it restored all his confidence. This passion underlying Joan's calm, was so profound, so self-controlled, so rare and human.

He was all at once filled with a radiant prophetic promise that in such a presence there was no growing cold for ever. Her very doubt of herself was but the earnest of the abiding force that lay so deep and staunch in her. Save as now, when it burst forth, swept silence aside and disclosed to him all the sweet hesitation of her youth.

"Had ever man such a wife?" cried George. "I at the

top, you at the bottom, and with you my guiding star! Rot simply! Who could look at you and be anything less than invincible?—Don't you see?"

"I see," said Joan. She got out of his arms and took up her work again. "And it's eleven o'clock, and you haven't done a stroke of work," said she.

In two minutes, his doubts dispersed, George was absorbed body and soul in the Book, and Joan pasting backs upon books patiently.

Presently there quivered out upon the silence a little fretful cry. It came from the room above them, where the wonderful baby slept, and his mother's hands shook upon the drab linen. She stirred impatiently and half rose; but the nurse was trustworthy, and to move now was the one single thing that must disturb George irretrievably. She might snap some delicate thread, she might put him back. At first, once when the child's cry had simply compelled her, she had run to him and run down again to see George's uncomplaining, baffled, searching face labouring back upon his broken thread of thought. An operation she was miserably conscious that took him the better part of an evening. Having no creative power herself this sweetly controlled anguish of George's was a thing she did not pretend to understand, but it made her feel extremely criminal.

Domestic terrors unsuspected by the young lurk indeed within all inspired documents.

The wail rose and held, then jerked off into a little tired sobbing, and Joan sat on quietly and shivered. Just at this time she often grew cold about the child. He was a highly strung, sensitive creature, full of irrepressible life, and swift delicate changes. The sort of creature a woman likes to keep close to her, that through the great mystery of inarticulate growth nothing may escape her.

But, oh! the shortness of the time and the amount that must be packed into it! And the baby was growing, growing, growing under the kind common eyes of the nurse, and with a sense as of a general dismemberment going on within her, loves cooling, hates gathering, doubts leering from every corner, nothing holding fair and square but her absolute unflinching love for George; her pas-

sionate adoration of the truth that lay in him, Joan beautifully did all her work. To have slurred one thing that she could still do for George would have struck his wife as an abject sort of defection. If she could no longer feel right she could at least do things in the right way.

She had an immense conception of the joys of the earthly life and an ungovernable longing to share in them, but once to lose touch with George in the life for which he lived, spelt chaos to Joan. And yet she often felt broken under the strain of the enthusiasm that had all petered out of her own heart, and ascetic living was having its effect upon her.

Of this material factor in her dismemberment Jasper knew nothing. Much as, under Joan's adroit guidance, he grew in veneration for his remarkable son, George was yet too aloof from common clay, too ethereal and reminiscent, so to speak, to go well with the processes of digestion.

His father preferred to lunch and dine in solitary ease and to contemplate George during tea-time, and in his intervals of relaxation when even *he* occasionally yawned and stretched like a human being.

At these times Jasper could think of poor George as he was before the blight had fallen upon him.

Thus, that the abundance of game and poultry he lavished upon the little girl went mostly to feed the sick, Jasper had no conception.

The eye-sore of George's broad parish was a dismal marsh where lived a seething colony of osier workers; dulled wretches, malarious, ague-stricken, impossible to move or mould. It was debatable land, and Jasper and the other claimant having been for thirty years at bitter feud, neither would do anything for the miserable natives.

George did what he could; half-breaking his heart at his failure to do anything. The place was weary with groaning old age; upon whom neither theory nor practice had the slightest effect—but who enjoyed delicacies; and most of the nourishing diet of the Vicarage found its way to the unspeakable swamp.

If Jasper knew little of the Vicarage meals, he could, however, guess a good deal in regard to Joan's moods,

and egged on by Rebecca resolved to take up his responsibilities. When sober, Jasper rarely went forth without some agricultural implement; when drunk he carried his crop.

So, thistle-spud or pruning knife in hand, he now prowled round often upon the track of Joan.

It soon became evident to his impatient observation that Joan's feelings for herself invariably gave way to any momentary feeling that moved her for her fellow. A natural gift due to nothing especially worthy in her. She fairly loathed, for example, the smell of the sick poor, yet when she caught the abhorred odour, so sorry did she feel that anyone could be so poignant a source of horror to any other creature that forthwith her face put on a wondrous air of compassion. The poor little pagan was fast becoming a most wily deceiver. Jasper, therefore, had to seek her coming out *alone* from her holy ministrations to find out what really was toward; and then the cold, dead weariness of her face pricked at his heart. One day he waylaid her in the laurel walk.

"Come," said he, "let the other things wait for once; and we'll go look at the plantations.

"Any man that respects himself," said Jasper, pausing on the hill to throw a loving glance over the sea of tassels, tender and pale with youth, tossing on the light breeze, "will plant spruce and pine on any stray bit of land that'll grow it. They're kindly things and smell sweet in the nostrils. You may be a curse to yourself and your family," said he, with a gusty sigh. It was becoming quite a luxury to humble himself before one so understanding as Joan. "But you like to think that the birds any way will be blessing you on the cold nights and in the hard days. There are queer virtues in pine woods. I tell you I'm often in and out of 'em and I see things. Not a tree that grows has the healing comfort in it of a fir. There's not a grief in this parish that doesn't turn in here at one time or another. A half-made thing, this conifer," said Jasper, spinning his words out nervously, "but it's wonderfully friendly to sorrow and love and the follies generally. Faith," said he, lifting his handsome head to sniff, "faith, I believe that smell would disinfect sin itself if the iniquity wasn't too rotten, you know.

"And the amount of lovers that skulk round here when they should be digging potatoes by the day on my own land! It's trespassing too, but I don't interfere with the poor fools. I hope Eustace won't be putting his oar in. Chock full of military exactingness, Eustace! You might remind him, Joan if he goes prying where'd he'd better be blind. But these woods are no place for girls to go in alone; too full of silence and mystery and undesirable secrets for—hem—unattended youth, you know. If I catch a girl on the prowl I take care to disturb her meditations by a shout or a remark. She'll get hold of a better thread next time." He turned accusingly upon Joan. "You come here too often, little maid."

Joan looked up flushing.

"Now look here, my girl," said he, quaking but valiant, "you've a dull life and a lot of sniggering duties with use rubbing the bloom off 'em. You've a husband you adore with a sort of Heavenly bloom on him that," he said sadly, "nothing will move. Oh, I don't deny that George is an astonishing fellow; strikes derision dumb, puts a check on criticism—for God's sake don't interrupt me—there's something above the like of you and me in George; keeps you living in a sort of shock, you know, does George, makes you see stars—burning bush business—have to take off your shoes; oil yourself generally; shave your head, you know, and all the rest. Pshaw! it won't yield to words, but there it is confounding the lot of us." Jasper took out his handkerchief.

At first the peculiar originality evident in George's father's summing-up of her husband hurt Joan, but finding that allegorical language may hide a respectful heart she took the greater with the less and refrained from comment. Moreover she always found a difficulty herself in finding the words that would quite do justice to George.

Jasper took up his parable again. "And so between George and Altar trimmings and the destroying patience of the agricultural labourer there's some splutter being set up in you—natural enough, too; George is enough to set volcanoes sprouting in a bed of sweet peas. In short you're living under exhausting conditions"; he paused to

congratulate himself upon this phrase. It expressed much in language pre-eminently delicate.

"But," said Joan, breaking off with an odd laugh.

"Oh, I expect nothing," he observed plaintively, "being a woman, catch you taking advice, even of the simplest—merely to sit tight with your weather eye open. Not you! You must be thinking things out. Fatal gift that of yours. A brooding woman will turn the sweetness of honey sour—can't help it, poor soul—the way she's made. And now instead of running a mile round so as to get home through these woods—a place you're too young for—why not get into the way—you know—ahem—of thinking aloud into me. I'm a drunken old sweep," sighed Jasper, "as all the world knows, but I'm a safer outlet than a fir grove for a girl with a maggot in her brain."

Jasper halted, puffing slightly, carefully to scan the far horizon, a glory now of delicate purples and greens.

Joan stood still to look at him, then she gave out a broken laugh.

"I felt you'd been finding me out. I'm glad it's you."

They were standing under a clump of trees upon the edge of the wood. Joan's feet moved softly amongst the golden needles, unloosening sweetest incense. Her skirt flickered darkly against the shadowed green of the pine trunks; the red reflection of the sunset lit up her quiet, white, young face. The youth in her appalled Jasper, but he meant to see this thing through.

"I think," she said slowly, "it all comes of an earthen vessel floating along side by side with a golden one. You have to be doing all sorts of things, you know, to keep yourself from cracking. So long as you're whole, earth will hold just as much as gold, and that's really the first thing to be thought of, don't you think?" she asked abruptly.

"My dear, yes," he stumbled, now feeling very much flushed.

"And George thinks I'm golden. Once I used to think I was myself. I used to feel just as George feels—about the very dullest things. I—I used to feel fairly heavenly with joy. You never felt such joy. It, it really was intoxicating," she said excitedly. "I could have done any-

thing then, I believe I could have been boiled in oil without a groan."

"So long as George was looking on," mused Jasper.

"He's looking on now," she said sharply, "and yet the interest in the thing—that sort of interest is dead. Simply it died. You might as well try to revive a corpse. Now I just wonder how on earth George can feel as he does, and—and hate Church work like poison."

She turned up her face to search Jasper's. He stood opposite to her, confused, pitiful, dumb.

"I really do think," she said entreatingly, "I'd like good things in a mild way, you know, if they were on the edges of life, not life itself, and all the rest edges. It's being jaded with goodness I sometimes think."

"You don't happen to have any—doubts—my girl," enquired Jasper with a nervous cough.

"Doubts! I haven't the ghost of a doubt. I believe in it all just as I do in the goodness of bread; but it doesn't touch me any more keenly; and yet one would feel—would feel—hungry without it. I think sometimes it must be like just ordinary husbands. Their socks and their buttons are a terror, and yet you couldn't do without them. There's nothing to put in their place."

"Good Lord!" remarked Jasper.

"I'd feel better," pursued Joan, "if I had a doubt; not so dead, you know."

"There come times of depression to all of us," said the unhappy man.

"Oh, I know; we get bored with things to go back to them quite happy again, when the weather changes or your mood. It's not that. Don't you see, it died? Now I loathe Parish."

"But you love George?"

"Love George! If I didn't nothing would matter. But since the things have grown difficult, sometimes I feel like a dog dancing on his hind paws. Suppose I got to look like that and George saw me?" said she, her grave attentive eyes fixed upon him.

"But God bless my soul!" cried Jasper, struck with a new notion, "this is in George's own particular line. He'd know directly how to deal with you—what to recommend."

"If—if George knew, he might get a chill himself."

"And if he did?" cried Jasper driven reckless, "if he did drop a feather or two off his wings they'd sprout again, take your oath of that. His religion is part of him."

"So was mine," said Joan drearily. "It was *me*. I don't think George—is—is ready to find me out—yet. It would interrupt him dreadfully. He's not ready," she repeated, her eyes obviously tracking George's needs.

"How's a man to help her if she goes off like that?" thought Jasper irritably. "Can't she stay below?"

"You're doing an injustice to George, my girl. This is a mere bolstering up—of damned selfishness—selfishness of a most colossal order—vast—amazing. A millstone of selfishness. Hanged if any one could stand it."

"But seeing that George hasn't the remotest notion of the fraud that's being practised on him. Since he firmly believes I still delight in all these things," she said, laughing. "Aren't you getting damp? Shall we go on? I know just exactly what George would feel—if he knew. He hasn't time for the thing. It would be a most horrid nuisance for George."

"Men rise on difficulties," said the fuming philosopher.

"Yes," said she, with a restive sigh, "I suppose they do. But one doesn't want oneself to be the difficulty. It's the absolute simplicity in George's faith in me and everything else that's so—so nice. I don't want to be the one to jar it. And George," she cried, with sudden vehemence, "isn't ready to rise on the loss of me. I know he isn't. He gets on better with me about him than he'd do with all the spiritual things in the world rolled into one," said she, too much in earnest to choose her words. "It's being young together," she added apologetically.

Amazement was growing steadily upon Jasper's countenance.

"Besides—oh, I know well enough if he did find out and suffer—on account of me, he'd get through it in the end; through me and everything else—we'd all be stepping stones in George's progress; it would be all for his good; and he'd begin to depend upon stepping stones. And then," cried this young heathen, with a break in her voice not unlike a sob, "where should I be?"

"Good Lord," muttered Jasper, "where indeed? a profession, this Church of England, complicated beyond the grasp of any plain man!"

"And at the bottom of my heart," said Joan hurriedly, "I feel I'm a coward. If I thought I wasn't really wanted I might get so sick of things,, so deadly sick, you know, that I might do something idiotic."

Her face was wan with fright.

"A riddle at the best of times," muttered Jasper, "this marriage, but when the Church creeps into it—a bottomless pit, that's what it is. Only He who made fools can judge of 'em."

"As if any God that George gives his life to serve isn't worth serving," cried Joan, oblivious to relevant observations, "and I giving my little miserable serving grudgingly! It is so low and vile and disloyal."

"Many men, many manners," said Jasper kindly, patting her hand, "and we can't all be boiling ourselves in crucibles and enjoying it."

"There have been thousands of vicars' wives before me, good women, sufficient to their husbands and everything else, who've lived contented and died happy."

"Cut out for the dispensation, my dear! Substantial useful creatures without points. You have to rack your memory to remember 'em. Pass off, most of 'em, leaving no mark on anything—nothing behind in fact, but a big family."

"I don't know about that," said Joan, with a sudden laugh. "If she's got a hobby—the misdemeanours in husbands or the laying quality in hens—the mark she leaves on you, has a most fiendish staying power. And, oh! I've forgotten, I've three coming to tea to-day. Can you run?"

When they reached the Vicarage gate, both breathless, Joan pulled up.

"And think, after all," she panted, "if George was the least, least, least atom like any of these ladies' husbands!"

"No such luck!" growled George's father. "George, a common-sense Englishman, indeed!"

"It would be the death of us if he was, that's all," said Joan, "of you and Miss Rebecca and me!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. WORRALL, one of Joan's expected guests, when glancing out of the window she beheld the squire, underwent an odd transformation, her eyes rolled in pleasurable excitement, her cheek bones glittered roseate with hope. "I wonder," she thought breathlessly, "I wonder if he's sober."

She scurried to a chair, grabbed for her breath, put on that air of ineffable leisure reserved by her for the County, and beamed creaking from out a steel-plated bodice.

"Perfectly sober, thank God," she murmured, the radiance slipping from her face.

But even sober, the aged sinner was bringing his son's head with sorrow to the grave, and his wife's death had in no definite way—what after all are family rumours?—solved the problem as to her guilt or innocence. One was still at liberty to fear the worst. The Winnington family profoundly interested Mrs. Worrall.

Her wait, moreover, had been both fruitful and improving. She had had time to range undisturbed through the room, and could tell you to a penny the price of every article in it. She had always had her own opinion as to the snobbish over-estimation on the part of the neighbourhood of Mrs. George Winnington's taste in house decoration, now it was happily confirmed.

A collection of job lots just saved by chintz and flowers. Any woman with her first baby, every stitch it wore brand new, and her own clothes it was to be hoped in good order, could do as much.

So Mrs. Peter Worrall girded up her loins again, and when Joan and her father-in-law came in, placed her gifts, which were many, wholly at the service of the drunken squire.

There was positive genius in the way in which, without

apparent foresight, limitation, stress or strain—upon *herself*—Mrs. Worrall could blend parish cuttings fraught with despair, the revolutions of her own domestic wheels, the sins of her neighbours; the incomes of her relations and the spiritual short-comings of her diocese, with the prominent virtues of her own docile little husband.

And in a relentless, rolling, pauseless strain the information flowed forth.

Jasper upon his part beamed also. After toiling in the wake of eagles the clucking of a hen may soothe. He prepared to enjoy a well-earned respite. Moreover, no matter how sunken in repentance Jasper might be, he could yet find a chuckling satisfaction in catching in a lady's chaste mind the lurid reflection of his own bottomless-pit reputation.

To this chronic outcast it had become a privilege to be the source to the elect of any joy so profound and satisfying.

"Never do I spend an afternoon in the society of the local British matron," he had once, in an unguarded moment, confessed to his friend, Joan, "but I feel as oily as a philanthropist."

Joan's smile was noteworthy, a source of much subsequent consolation to her mentor.

"My dear Mrs. Winnington," said Mrs. Worrall, nodding at large at the garden, "how thankful you should be to live in a rural parish. Ours is Country, of course, but marred by factories and factory girls! A canker spot upon the earth those poor factory girls. We've a mission now amongst them. A most holy young man from London, tall, slender, dark, racking cough, poor fellow; fifteen thousand pounds, I understand, in good securities, and the nicest connections. Such powers of eloquence, such dauntless courage; such a gift of getting to the point, devoured with holy zeal, really. He'll say anything, only sometimes, dear fellow, his voice gives out. He reminds me often of Mr. Winnington."

"Oh!" murmured Joan feebly, avoiding Jasper's eyes.

"Exceptional men quite, both of them. Only last night he made my flesh creep as he exhorted these heart-breaking girls to flee from Sodom——" She paused to choose a cake.

"But, my dear lady," struck in Jasper, "don't you think

it unwise to emphasise the natural leanings of such young persons for these notorious resorts. The modern factory girl, I'm credibly informed, is nothing if not enterprising. If she's not laying heel to ground to get to Sodom, sure to be peeping at it through a glass. Wouldn't it be as well for this—ahem!—hectic and apostolic young man, instead of directing her attention to such undesirable localities, to be introducing something different into her mind for her imagination to work on? To give her something to amuse herself with, in short? We leave buffooning and spectacular effects, Mr. Winnington, to the Dissenters. Had you been with me to-day on my rounds you'd be satisfied, I think, that Mr. Sprowl had succeeded in touching the imaginations of the poor creatures in the right direction. It was a most impressive sight. I positively assure you they were limp. I noticed the absence of several false fringes, and one girl had fits," said the Vicar's lady, proudly.

"I don't think Mr. Sprowl can be the very least like George," remarked Joan feebly.

"So far, dear Mr. Winnington's sphere of ministration has lain in rural parishes," said her visitor encouragingly. "At present he is free to cultivate that sweet and gracious demeanour which, indeed, we all love. Agricultural sins, dear Mrs. Winnington, are nothing compared to ours. They require less urgent measures. We do not crush butterflies with traction engines. As we all know, the Country is full of smoking flax which must not be quenched. Our hard workers, those bathed, alas, in bloody sweat"—Mrs. Worrall was finding inspiration in this close intimacy with a notorious scoffer, she kept her eyes fixed upon him and her face shone. "Those stern labourers in the Lord's vineyard have often discussed Mr. Winnington, and we all agree in thinking that in an active field of labour where sin stalks naked, so to speak, he could be as grand in divine wrath as he is now sweet in charity. By the way"—she shifted her large person so as more directly to face the sinner—"my young cousin, Guy Gurling—your son will remember him, Mr. Winnington, has just come in for his property. A nice little place in Wiltshire; three thousand a year, just half what it used to be; he is travelling with his valet in Japan, and is bringing us home cases of presents.

"Such a tragic love affair. Relation of our dear Bishop's, and *he* married, you'll remember, a Peer's grand-daughter. Oh, well! They parted, and, crushed by the blow"—she was now approaching delicate ground, she clasped her hands therefore, and lowered her modest eyes, "I grieve to say he forgot that he was made in the image of God, and went down—hem—amongst the swine. He—he—took to Drink."

"Poor lad!" said Jasper sympathetically. "Love is very wearing."

She glared unwinkingly.

"He is now travelling with a valet——"

"Ha! On the cure racket," Jasper thrust out his lip reflectively. "Don't believe myself in these modern fads."

"My cousin having over-come his degrading vice is travelling for pleasure and profit, Mr. Winnington. He is, in fact, finishing his education with a view to contest the County."

Jasper seemed to have fallen into impersonal abstraction.

"Learning to govern England by sampling foreign drinks. It won't work, my dear lady, it will never work. Radical innovations sure to follow."

"You have apparently misunderstood me, Mr. Winnington."

Her bursting cell of urgent information was scarce tapped, however, and she had no notion of being deterred by any senile scoffer. She turned to Joan, and glanced at a small Italian saint on a bracket.

"How sweet," she said, "and how foreign. Another cousin dreadfully rich, poor boy; I only hope he'll steady down presently and grow more worthy of his responsibilities. *Horse Racing*," she whispered hoarsely, looking round in a general sort of way, "Monte Carlo, and—I fear—an Actress"; her voice faltered with emotion.

"Good Lord," murmured Jasper modestly.

Mrs. Worrall threw him a fleeting glance with some enquiry in it, and now having sufficiently proved her family's kinship with the Great in its diversions, passed on to appraise it domestically; her point, shift it though she might, still hard in her grasp.

"I'll show him," she thought haughtily, "I'll show him the position *we* hold in spite of his late wife's impudence.

And even if she had called," she jeered in her mocking heart, "it wouldn't have resulted in so much as a garden party!"

"The luxury of these great houses!" she wailed. "The prodigal waste! I was fortunate enough to secure one of Horace's under-cooks—attended solely to the upper servants' mess. *Entrées, hors d'œuvres*, soups, fish, wine, everything of the best—*Daily*. Luxury, I assure you, quite painful to witness, your thoughts flew back inevitably to the last days of the Roman Empire. As for the parties, the fêtes, the balls, Peter was deeply concerned—and in one's own family, you know. This cousin is also travelling with his valet—on the Continent, and means to bring us all presents." Again her eyes sought the plaster saint. "Presently I shall hope to rival even your sweet room, Mrs. Winnington. By the way, your other friends have not arrived. I didn't myself see how Mrs. Close possibly could come. Can't keep her servants, poor thing, no one in the house now but her cook; though that doesn't excuse her to my mind in sending out her husband with the perambulator."

"God bless my soul, not Kelly!" roared the squire, whose attention had wandered.

Mrs. Worrall turned her stunned eyes upon him.

"No," said she with deliberation. "I allude to Mr. Close. Mr. Kelly pins up his coat-tails, I believe, and goes hunting."

"And takes his fences like a bird."

"He excels in sport, I believe. The last time I heard of him he was engaged in conducting a rat hunt in his own Church."

A horrid memory of scurrying green eyes across a dim aisle, a bi-weekly occurrence that spoilt twilight, got hold of Joan.

"Oh!" she cried impulsively, "I wish he'd come here."

"We'll have him over, my girl, we'll have him over," said Jasper cheerily.

"He would at least have the opportunity of witnessing true spirituality," said Mrs. Worrall reprovingly. "I regret to say he persists in avoiding Peter. That is, if Mr. Winnington did not absent himself during the proceedings."

The lady's studious habit of sinking her voice when she

mentioned George exasperated Joan, and the grotesque coupling of rats and spirituality twinkled fiendishly in Jasper's eyes.

"I daresay George could manage the rats as well as Mr. Kelly," said Joan loftily. "I suggested Mr. Kelly because he seems to enjoy the thing. One doesn't like to see enjoyments going to waste."

"Especially if they're rational," chuckled Jasper, "and at the same time connected with the Church."

Mrs. Worrall's eyes rested sadly upon the scoffer, then fixed Joan.

"It is a great mistake upon his wife's part don't you think, Mrs. Winnington?" she demanded sternly.

Joan having forgotten the context had nothing to say upon this dark interjection. Jasper more quick, hurled himself into the pause.

"Damp sort of fellow, Close; be all the better for the airing—never sit near that sort of man, but I'm afraid he'll set up blue mould in me."

Mrs. Winnington rose.

"Ah, good-bye, Mr. Winnington. Do come to see me soon, Mrs. Winnington, and do—" her voice sank to a thrilling coo—"do tell Mr. George Winnington that Peter—and you know what Peter is—what his standard is—well, Peter came home the other day rigid—rigid with what I can only call holy joy after hearing that sermon at Wyncote. Dear Mrs. Winnington," she screamed with startling suddenness, halting at the hall window, "you don't mean to say you keep Wyandottes, a disastrous breed for a small family; so bad for table. Table and egg-producing combined is what we want, and non-sitters. Do take my advice, and have Orpingtons or Orpington crossed with Houdens." Her voice quivered back to a thin minor. "Don't forget my message. Your husband's growing reputation lies, I assure you, very close to our hearts." She took an appraising glance round. "So fortunate he can nurse and perfect his gifts in so sweet and hallowed a spot, remote from harrassing scenes of sin; from grinding, dreadful strength-sapping labour. You know how amusing Peter is," she smiled benignly, "he always calls Mr. Winnington 'The gilt pill of the Diocese.' Good-bye again, and don't forget Orpingtons are the birds to breed from. How young you look, to

be sure, and cool and untired. You make me feel such a working woman." She laughed with an arch nod. "I've got two classes before me now, a Bible reading, and a maternity bag. Ah well! I mustn't keep you from your graceful leisure." When safe outside the gate, the lady turned again, her face quite motherly, and bent it towards the house significantly. "That is a great responsibility you have assumed, and a solemn one. I do so wish you could hear Peter on the subject. Perhaps some day—at luncheon——" Joan's face counselled haste. "May God direct you," cried Mrs. Worrall, striking out precipitately for the hill.

Joan flushed scarlet, then laughed. She clicked the gate sharply to; fled up the path, and in two jumps was beside Jasper, half raging, half laughing.

"I wish George was the hunt whip or a jockey, or on the comic stage. There's no middle course in this life, no compromise—can't you see there's not, if you're honest? You must love it or loathe it, or be a sort of hurdy-gurdy that can turn out duty by the piece."

"My child," recommended Jasper, "be calm. You don't take things in the right spirit."

"Don't mention the word."

His eye-brows jerked together. This was speaking into him with a vengeance.

"George to be bandied about in that sort of way! It's like coming upon a black-beetle in the middle of a plum cake! Talk of casting pearls before swine!"

"My girl! There's a trace of pig in the best of us," said Jasper sadly. "What we've got to do is to make the most of the material at our disposal both in ourselves and others. Each of us we're led to suppose is created for some good purpose. What we've got to do in regard to our neighbours is to discover this purpose. It's obscure at times—but then, to be sure," he sighed indulgently, "all life is a riddle. Now poor Peter Worrall's wife is a woman we should be thanking God for in a dull neighbourhood, and not swearing at. Enjoy her, my girl. You'll never enjoy her younger."

"I could enjoy her well enough if that was all," said Joan mournfully, "but that's entirely the wrong way of looking at human beings with souls, can't you see? It's a sort of point of honour to——"

"We've reason to reckon with as well as honour. The point of view I suggest is the only one to make the lady endurable to reasonable beings."

"Reasonable beings!" commented Joan, with uncommitting eyes.

Unused to avalanches save of his own making, Jasper's distracted senses seemed to him to bulge.

"You'll hardly believe it, but it's true," said Joan, suddenly grown quite gentle. "If George had that woman to entertain for half an hour he'd say something quite simple and natural—without a word of—of cant in it or priggishness—or any other abomination, that would—just alter her face. I've seen him with worse cases, you know. I try to make her comfortable as to tea and things. And so long as she keeps away from George—I'd be sorry to see her different. If she grew either coherent or truthful her dullness would fairly suffocate you."

Jasper had now reached the end of his tether, and was perishing for a peg.

"Damn it all! I really beg your pardon, my dear—but deuce take it, we can't all be atmospheres, and the world barking and snivelling in a whirl-wind of cross currents."

Joan laughed merrily.

"That's not George's effect—so far."

"Lord, no! He slips past all the dangers, and through it all, strange to say, remains a man. The fellow has a genius for sanctity. It would be sheer impudence on the part of amateurs like ourselves to attempt any rivalry with a specialist."

"Ho! teaching Joan the wisdom of the aged."

The bland satire in the bassoon-like voice brought the Squire to his feet.

"Hallo! Rebecca! You?"

"I, and full of news."

"Will it affect us?" cried Joan.

"Affect you quite pleasantly. Buck you up; exorcise any fiends of morbidity there may be about. Tom Thryng and a friend are to stop in the village with his company for a day or so; he met George, so he tells me, and invited himself for dinner and the night. Fourth cousin, isn't

he, Jasper? And I presume you'll invite your father-in-law and me, Joan."

"Six!" cried Joan, "a little dinner-party. Can I manage? What do you think?"

"Quite time you tried. I'll send things over, and, Jasper, you look to the wine."

Jasper groaned.

"We've promised——" Joan began to explain.

"Promised who?—what?"

"Promised Winty to have nothing in the house for a year if he won't either. There are months still to run."

Miss Rebecca vulgarly whistled.

"Make themselves ill with lemonade—disgrace the family. Wish George had sent 'em to me," jerked out Jasper.

"George didn't think——"

"Thought of his father's sins, anyway."

"Don't be maudlin, Jasper," said Rebecca from out a dream, "as though you ever gave him the chance to forget."

"At least it's Thursday. The right night," said Joan, considering.

"Right night?" demanded Miss Westcar.

"The only one quite free. We needn't stir out," said Joan gleefully.

"No cloud apparently without some silver lining! You won't get liver complaint, either of you, for want of exercise. That reminds me that Carr wants podophyllin," she muttered, whipping out her tablets. "Joan, why did you give up riding with Billy? No function, surely, at half-past six?" she demanded magisterially.

"Oh! you see there's Baby! I haven't much time, and then I can have him all to myself. I *can* ride," she said proudly. "I went on till I could. Billy says I could hunt. —We have the loveliest times," she added, and broke off flushing under the challenge of the great black eyes.

"Where was George now, dust to his eyes and dog-tired? Stop, let me count this—one, two, three, four—ha! that's it. Well?"

"At Aiken. He does a great deal there now—at off times."

"Humph!"

"Mr. Abel," explained Joan, "is so old and there are perfect mountains of work to be got through, so George says."

"Memo," muttered Rebecca—"Mr. Lynn; I promised him some Gregory. Hem—one, two, three and——"

"Catch him," cried George, tossing his great baby. His fine, radiant, manly presence smiling happily from the doorway set carping objection at defiance.

Joan, Jasper, and Rebecca were ready on the instant to sacrifice themselves upon the dullest altar for George's slightest spiritual advancement.

"Wonderful baby, don't you think, Miss Rebecca?" said George. "Seems to be all back-bone. The usual, run wobble mostly."

"Healthiest village in England. We don't breed weeds here. Look at your father. Oh, well, look at yourself."

"The child," said Jasper, "is as fresh as paint; alive every inch of him. The sight of a poor devil of a town baby gravels me."

"But," said George, with suspicious haste, "it's wonderful how towns *can* grow babies. I've been astonished lately at the specimens I've come across."

"Pah! blown out with patent foods," explained Miss Rebecca. "Look at young Jasper's condition. You can't pinch the boy. See?"

George looked from the child to Joan, glowing above him, too young to be the mother of the strapping boy, and an extremely odd look came into the vicar's face. With a resolute effort he swept it off, and his usual bright, pleasant one met Joan's serenely.

"So we're going to entertain soldier men. How does it strike you, Joan?"

"It's lovely; it's altogether delightful," said Joan in honest ecstasy.

"I wondered if you'd mind. You're such a busy small person," he said half doubtfully.

"But to see people—people that couldn't tire you. To have a real live dinner-party of your own," she cried breathlessly. "Oh! George, the change of it!" Of a sudden her face shrank back apologetically from his start. "One can use some of the presents now," she said lamely.

In George's pure passionate eyes there was an unmistak-

able, visible shock—and an odd suggestion of compassion, whilst Joan fell lower in her own estimation than any beast.

"One, two, three," counted Miss Rebecca, in an exasperated tone. "Spirit," she said inwardly, "is more cruel than the grave; but if he begins to pity her it will upset the apple-cart completely. What he's got to do wants courage with a swing in it or I'm vastly mistaken. You can't save them both. I'd better stick to George and throw a bomb of practicality into that spiritual potholer. Joan," said she in a tone of startling distinctness, "put the child on that sofa on his back, so—stretch him out. Good gracious! earthquakes are fools to babies. In that cross-light one leg had a wasted look. I have a rooted horror of infantile paralysis."

A series of breathless experiments having removed all cause of anxiety, grandfather, father, and mother stood absorbed in idol worship. The spell in the air was broken, and Miss Rebecca shut out of the game. So she watched the comely group, but her eyes rested longest upon Jasper.

George's father undeniably lay heavy upon his son, and the underlying anxiety in some sort throttled spontaneous intercourse. But when innocently worshipping "Ours," the generic term by which Jasper the younger was known, George insensibly fell into Joan's way with the old man. It was soothing, very different from the unnecessary silences under which on occasion he had been called upon to wilt, yet it worried Jasper. It seemed to be laying him under still another obligation to the fellow, as though he were not already beholden enough. This sub-current of irritation now prompted him to a suave remark.

"What do you propose to give 'em to drink, George?"

"Drink! I never thought of that," said George, honestly aghast. "I wish Winty had stuck to good beer, it was bad brandy that floored him."

"Oh, well! There's the village pub.," said Jasper kindly, detecting an unexpected spark of right feeling in George. "They can fortify themselves."

"Yes," said George drily, "and Blanche has secured the Colonel, so she'll save the family honour."

Jasper tried to look as though he were not saying, "Thank God."

"Ah, well! they're all normal again now, anyhow," thought Miss Rebecca miserably, "and Jasper's as happy as a lamb with two tails, and I'm not in it!" From Jasper her sad eyes turned to Joan.

Hour by hour, day by day, the young woman was wrestling her last hope from the old one, who yet loved on doggedly, loyally, both man and woman, renegade and supplanter. And in the contemplation of her own disintegration going on under her very own nose Miss Rebecca found an engrossing and most bitter occupation.

"But for her," she murmured, forcing her shining needles to be still, "but for her this minute I'd be safe up at the house, and there would be no further lapses in that quarter." She drew in her lips sharply and the destroying moustache jerked at the corners. It was unfortunate that Jasper should have chosen this precise moment to turn to his first love.

"My dear, Rebecca," he began, with a feeling of delicacy, understood only too well by its victim, promptly averting his gaze, "what about that accident at the Rifle Range? Was that Fletcher fellow hurt?"

Miss Rebecca hitched herself up and put aside foolery.

"Just severely enough," she pronounced, "I'm thankful to say, to give him a lesson. He'll limp badly for a month. An invaluable object lesson for the village. He scooted, did you hear, scared by the firing? Had he got off scot free, we'd have them all turning tail; now they'll know that to stand fast means saving their skins. That Rifle Corps will boom, I tell you, before I'm done with it."

"Most things you touch, my dear lady, do boom," said Jasper appreciatively.

"With one exception," thought the poor lady, dropping feebly back upon sentiment, whilst Jasper's eyes strayed to George's wife.

"Well," said Miss Rebecca at last in her cheeriest tone, "I'm off."

"Where's your carriage?" said Jasper, rising with some precipitation. When he happened to remember them he had now occasional twinges in regard to Rebecca.

"With poor Isabella in Heaven," he sometimes reflected

resignedly, "it was full time to think of—things." Thus he put it.

"I came in the dogcart," said Rebecca, "and left it at the Blacksmith's. I drove the new chestnut—you saw her, Jasper—and she turned me over on a heap of stones and generally disgraced herself."

"And you never said a word!" cried Joan. "Are you hurt?"

"A bruise and a twist; nothing to speak of."

"Catch Rebecca playing the low pathetic while she has a leg to stand on," said Jasper, with admiring pride. "I've known her come in laughing from a cropper that would have sent many a man roaring to his bed. Not another woman in the county but her would drive that cross-grained rip—God bless my soul, my dear girl, you're as lame as a duck.

"Here, take my arm," he commanded, with reckless valour, as soon as they got outside the gate.

"Two derelicts wobbling together down the village street," said Rebecca tartly. "Do you want us to be the laughing stocks of the neighbourhood? Have some sense, man!"

"Rebecca," said he presently, the sentiment tap now well on. "We know each other too well; we've suffered too much—God help us!—apart; don't you think——"

"Now that he's all swept and garnished, ready for the seven new devils, what do you think George will be at next?" demanded Miss Rebecca.

"It's a choice of evils," sighed Jasper, now fully restored to reason. "He might swell out into a popular preacher; I believe he's amazing in that line; believe myself the little girl coaches him."

"Popular preacher! He's got his eye on Aiken and old Abel. Directly poor old Abel drops off George will be up to his neck in the submerged."

Jasper gasped in a horrid silence. "This is awful news," at last he muttered. "The girl! The child!"

"The girl, bless you, is the guiding star in that astounding establishment. It's she who will land him in the seething pit. Talk of irony of fate! If he'd married—stodge—he'd end, without a doubt, in Lambeth."

"The child?" said Jasper, in calm despair.

"Oh, they get through a lot."

"Ours wouldn't."

"One would think you referred to a handful of rickets," said Miss Rebecca angrily. "What others have done, 'Ours,' I hope, will be found capable of doing."

"Look at his nerves!"

"Look at his shoulders!"

"Oh, well," he said soothingly, "think of the girl."

"Don't I think of her till I'm black in the face? To be called upon to spend one's old age in arguing against one's conscience, indeed! It's an absolutely indecent exhibition, this misplaced anger of yours," said Rebecca. "George is going as straight as a die."

Jasper rolled out a groan. "That's the damn—ahem—the—the cunning of the fellow. That's where he has us all."

"If you had so much as one spark of religion about you, Jasper, what a comfort we might now find it."

Jasper looked regretful and returned to Joan. "She's not old enough to play the game, I suppose, else she might be learning to make the most of both worlds," he mused.

"The game that's floored more philosophy than ever we'll know of till the day of judgment to be played by a girl with neither experience nor opportunities! Jasper, I hope to mercy you're not bringing softening upon yourself."

"It matters little to anyone, save himself and the Census, whether the average parson marries or keeps single," burst out Jasper after a pause, "but the celibacy of saints should be enforced."

CHAPTER XV.

JOAN's descent into the icy pit of indifference seemed to be arrested on the very brink by the vague confusion of joyousness let loose in her through the prospect of her first wholly earthly dinner-party.

Parochial chores lost their leaden insignificance and grew purposeful. Desolating wastes of hemming gleamed silver in the lightened air, and of a sudden her needle grew tractable.

Joan's sweet leisurely ways with the poor were this morning full of sun and scent and pleasure, no longer a triumph of perfection swathed in affliction. She really rather enjoyed the dispensation.

Since neither time nor endeavour seemed able to curb Joan's hurrying young senses in their wild revolt against the sights and odours of the Poor, the potters inherent in the uttermost parts of them, their shifty, haunting vagueness, she had ceased to speculate, and had just turned her attention to finding out what the Poor really did want her to be to them, and being it with all her might. Thus her ways had grown as leisurely as any village vegetable of them all; and she had become an inimitable listener.

And to-day, blissful but perplexing miracle! she enjoyed it. Everything happily accomplished, bright, excited, smiling, she now threw the study door open and burst in to find George, amidst a chaos of melancholy social literature, as full of glow and movement, and the joy and glory of life as herself, firing volleys of sharp pertinent questions at Dr. Baker.

Being a born enthusiast, in the throes of any new work bristling with difficulty, George was at his best.

His first experience of work on a large scale at Aiken, held every spur to action necessary to fire his ardent nature, his own ignorance, as usual, the one and only circumstance that could block his path, and *that* after all was surmountable. But until it was surmounted he knew no rest. He worked in a frenzy, and so thoroughly did he enjoy the work that he required no rest, while to draw ruthlessly upon the knowledge of his friends was part of George.

Dr. Baker's talk of seething millions dejected Joan, but she was truly sorry for his lungs. Her mute greeting was sympathetic.

Baker was a kindly strong man who had suffered most things.

The sweet directness of Joan had always interested him. Her single-hearted devotion to George gave him a pleasant security as to George's future.

Sometimes in contemplating the pair he felt moved to disagree with Bishop Taylor in regard to that divine's conclusion upon married saints.

"It's all so big, so intractable," said George; by way of greeting, nodding at Joan. "It incites one to sledge-hammer attacks and haste. They've all been at that game tooth and nail these many years, consequently the work, every bit of it, is perfunctory. The clubs fairly reek with the impatience of estimable young men, and there's a sort of grotesque pathos in Abel's own afflicting fits of breathless overwhelming rejuvenation. Before you can turn in that chaos you've got to get the leisure of Eternity into you and go back again to beginnings, your tail between your legs. But about these schools one look is worth a thousand words, and your point of view bleat with ours makes an excellent combination. You being a swell in these matters more-over——"

"Oh! I say—I'll come. But when?"

"That's the question: we're so full. Thursday, Friday, Saturday, impossible all! and not a day next week." He paused to consider. "What do you say to to-night? Can you manage it?"

"But," cried Joan, "to-night? They're coming. To-night's our dinner-party. George, you haven't forgotten?"

There was a sharp, piteous note of revolt in Joan's voice that turned both men's eyes upon her.

"I'd clean forgotten!" said George remorsefully. "Of course it can't be to-night. You haven't heard our news, Dick. There's a detachment of Lancers coming through, and Fred Thryng, a cousin, and his friend, Captain Heron, are to sleep and dine here. It's Joan's first dinner-party, it was a scurvy trick to forget it."

"To forget; to forget," thought Joan, in rather a frightened way, "when I can remember nothing else. It is hard to be getting so different from George—and trying to be like him is really absolutely no good."

His thread of thought broken, George was now quite ready for the luncheon his wife had come to announce.

"Poor beggars must quench their thirst upon effervescing drinks as you'll have to do, Dick," he said presently, opening soda water.

"What! Winty's contract not out yet?"

Dr. Baker spoke absently. Hitherto he had thought of his hostess as George's wife, he was now thinking of her as a woman; a quiet, delicate-moulded, extremely young woman with an odd, elusive, haunting attraction of her own.

Because of his chilled, cut-off life, Baker could think of a woman who has everything to learn, as one of her own sex who has learnt everything may think, if she think at all, tenderly, oddly, kindly, a suspicion somewhere in the back-ground of a smile.

"In spite of effervescing drinks, I prophesy a great success for your first dinner-party, Mrs. George," said he, with a kind look at her. "I wish I was there to see."

"I wish you were," said Joan, warming to his smile and his infirmities.

George's thoughts were miles away tugging at a knot. Something in the air brought them back. George was extremely sensitive to moral atmospheres, which fact spoke well for his wife's persistent efforts at self-control and her native power of soothing.

In a flash he perceived some subtle attraction going on in his gentle Joan. His thoughts forsook knots, and upon the spur of no apparent logic fell, with merry curiosity, to circle around vanity.

Having been busy since his honeymoon beyond most men, and finding her all sufficing as she stood—a perennial inspiration—he had thought but little of Joan's complexion, now he remembered it. The full, soft, luminous, white of her cheeks, the lights and shadows in her deep dimples, the new roundness in her slender figure. Her timid courage and swift gracious ways seemed to give her at that moment an urgent, rather a surprising right to the brilliancy of things generally. All at once he was oddly proud of Joan and oddly sorry for her, and he remembered Miss Rebecca's diamonds.

"I say, Joan, you must wear some of the family jewels to-night."

"Oh!" cried Joan; another word must have choked her.

"Diamonds on Mrs. George will have the effect of that old sparkling hock of your father's. Your dinner-party won't give a thought to the missing wine, George."

Joan thanked him with a glance.

"I think Cousin Rebecca would like it," she added reflectively.

"Anyway, *I* shall. I'm going to spend the afternoon in the Marshes. The thought of you in diamonds will keep me going."

He threw a searching glance at the board, bare save for a wealth of red roses.

"Pity," said he regretfully, "that Miss Rebecca's things haven't come, I could carry some along."

The haste and dexterity wherewith Joan swept the sudden aghastness from off her face was another revelation to Dr. Baker.

"That marsh, I take it, absorbs more than its fair share," he said dryly. "Have you any notion how much that precious locality spends per annum in poisonous concoctions of opium?"

"I know to the uttermost farthing," said George shamelessly, "but when even opium fails the wretches, a change of diet will sometimes pick 'em up."

"George!" cried his remorseful wife, "there will be heaps left. You know the amount she'll send."

"Miss Rebecca's contributions would need to come in bulk," said the doctor, glancing with an inquiring and awakened understanding at the barren board, then at its mistress.

"I wonder just how much *she* likes this sort of thing?" mused he. "It's not conducive to high spirits, anyway, whatever it may be to high thinking."

"You know I suppose that Miss Rebecca has cast the marsh off since her three selected willow wands funk'd the sergeant?" he said, turning to George.

"I know. When are you going round there?"

"What has science to do in that *galère*?"

"To give us a leg up when we stumble."

"That you may stumble again?"

"That we may get over the ground in spite of stumbles, leaving you to fill up the pit-falls."

"Church scavengers no less."

"Dick! The book, the small one of sonnets will be ready for London in a week or so."

"Are you going up with it?"

"Rather! We couldn't send our first book—child, to

face life alone, could we, Joan? It would never have got written but for her," he said, turning to Baker. "When I grow a bit *tête-montée*—every man is a fool on occasion after midnight," he said, with his boyish laugh, "and sees a few of the fine things he thinks and knows shining out in his work—at these moments of exaltation, I can see some of Joan's truth glancing in and out of the sentences, a little river of pure gold, and I feel that I have a right to hope. The truthfulness that lies in us is a fool to that in women, you know. But you don't—you haven't married one."

"I'll take your word for it."

Joan reproached by her own illimitable power to lie wriggled in extreme discomfort.

"Naturally it would be a most superior article in the ethical line," pursued Baker serenely. "A woman has come to her kingdom in this particular, through much tribulation, conducted in her closet mostly, in the sole companionship of her own driving conscience. We've been having the lies actively kicked out of us for generations; generally in the open air. Truth is a faculty still in the rough in us. In them—where it exists—it's polished to a bewildering perfection. Too much truth spoils laughter, Mrs. George! You mustn't be bringing weeping and gnashing of teeth into George's big book. I'd like to see those diamonds," he said rising, "but instead I must be off to muddle about in the dark places amidst decay."

"Perhaps to rake in treasure," suggested George cheerfully.

Baker's kind, sad eyes were on Mrs. George. He threw out his hollow chest and laughed gently.

"In spite of the treasures the most enthusiastic of the lot of us would chuck it all often to go fool round in a sunbeam."

"This from you, Dick?"

"Truth is infectious. Mrs. George, may I come in on Friday to tea? Perhaps your chronicle of folly may exorcise evil humours. Hullo! The baby! I say, Mrs. George, he has no business with that wail. Let me see. This tooth wants lancing now—this minute. George, hold him. Oh! you'd rather, Mrs. Winington. All right, then. Turn your head—so."

The child gave a little gasping cry, and then slowly whitened.

"Some brandy," said Dr. Baker, sharply.

"There is none," said the mother's low voice.

"George, nip round. There's a flask in my cart."

George was back in two minutes, and soon the odd collapse was over.

"That little chap if he ever gets ill will need stimulating, Mrs. George. Don't mind what any one tells you, give him a few drops of whiskey, brandy, anything, and don't lose any time about it. He takes after you. He's far too sensitive and vivid and realistic in a youthful way. He pulls too hard on his vitality. See! even now, he can't be quiet. He'll probably never have a day's illness in his life, but if he does, stimulate him, even if you've got to turn the doctor out to do it. Doctors go by sight not faith. They won't have seen what I have, and they never put much trust in mothers."

"She'll be collapsing too, some day," he thought as he drove off. "She'll get too tired to lift herself up again, and lose heart and grip together. It racks the life of the like of her to be working double. Just the sort of woman to go to pieces all at once in an unexpected sort of way. Meanwhile, I hope she won't be burning herself trying to rekindle dead fires. It will be interesting to see in what sort of way the young soldiers will further her several tasks!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"To disgrace us all for Winty's soul," snapped Beatrice, who had flounced in to regulate Joan's dinner.

"It's not Winty's soul; it's his wife's body," Joan patiently explained.

"Catch George under any circumstances leaving out soul."

"George must stick to his colours."

"Such colours!"

"At least they're George's."

The fact was beyond argument. Beatrice flung back

upon a variant of her original grievance. "If only they'd been curates."

"I'm extremely glad they're not."

"They'd expect nothing."

"That's just it. They'd expect nothing. Doing without things is part of them. I—I'm tired of watching people doing without things. Just for once I want to have people to dinner who expect everything, who've never in all their lives done without one single thing they've wanted."

Beatrice stared.

"Well, really! After all George wasn't born a curate. I remember when he expected as much as other people and got it too. Catch George in those days letting every good thing pass him!"

"George never lets any good thing pass him even in these."

"Dear me, no! He grabs all he can lay hold on to squander it on some object."

"That's the good of it to George. At least, he doesn't give that away."

"What it is to be born *dévoté*! Good gracious! Suppose you'd married Billy!"

"In that case I shouldn't have met George. I daresay I'd have enjoyed myself immensely. Billy is very easy."

Beatrice yawned.

"Simple pleasures are less easy than they appear to be."

"Billy," said Joan suddenly, "has a very nice way of loving. He has the smallest possible opinion, for instance, of your eye for a horse——"

Beatrice whisked round. "The impudence of Billy!"

"As for dogs, you're nowhere!" said Joan, with a merry laugh. "Yet, in spite of it all, he thinks you infallible. Any line in which he himself excels must, according to Billy's logic, be too unimportant for your powers."

"Oh, Billy!" sighed Beatrice pathetically. "But what's the use of talking to you? You don't understand worldly ambitions. You couldn't, I suppose, even conceive of any woman, who having got a husband keeps on hankering after a career for him—to take the monotony off?"

"A career!" Joan looked doubtful. "If you begin to

mix yourself up in a career you'll be getting lines in your face, I'm afraid, and queer panics and a horribly low opinion of yourself—a sort of grovelling sensation, you know. Beatrice, you'd hate it."

To this Beatrice stared unconditional assent. The rest of her face shot out inquiries.

"That is, of course, if it's a serious career," pursued Joan dreamily, "you'd be so immensely proud of that, you couldn't bear a speck or a shadow on it."

"Good gracious. You do take things at a gallop. What I want to do with Billy is just to put him into Parliament in a mild way."

"Oh, Parliament," said Joan more cheerfully. "Surely between you you could manage that. It's not as though you'd be breathless to see Billy doing things in a triumphant sort of way. You could go at everything quietly and help him with his speeches."

"Look at his legs," said Billy's wife tragically. "No one would listen to his speeches."

"Oh, well! If your words wouldn't very soon make them forget his legs!—You could be so sure of yourself with Billy, so sure of your power to serve him."

Billy's wife bridled.

"One would think you spoke of a child."

"Oh! I don't mean that at all. But Billy is not in any sort of way—oh! holy, you know, or sacred or set apart. When you help him it wouldn't be necessary to sort out all your words and thoughts and ideas before you'd think of offering them to Billy."

"Good Heavens! You're so creepy, Joan. As though it was John the Baptist's head on a charger I was about to present to poor Billy!"

Joan started.

"I don't feel the very least like that, really. If I were you," she added hastily, "I'd begin to get Billy ready for Parliament at once. It would be such a comfort to be absolutely sure that he couldn't get on without you at all, that there's not the least danger he'll ever be shooting ahead and leaving you behind."

"I'd like to catch Billy at that indeed. Billy to be putting on the airs of a comet! You have the most extraordinary notions of men and marriage. Joan! Keep both

within bounds that's my idea, and you're all right! But once you let either overflow——" Here words failed Beatrice.

She paused to reflect.

"Some don't matter. It's easy to dam them back, Billy for example. But—George now, once he began to overflow in earnest—I believe it's in him to flood everything with the unexpected," added Beatrice upon another inspiration.

"Beatrice," said Joan precipitately, "I've got all the vases ready on the table. Come and look."

"Hullo!" cried Beatrice, and she was through the French window at a bound. "Here they are. Catch up that hat and come."

It happened to be Jasper the younger's, but its soft quillings made a fair setting for an oval face.

The girls sped across the lawn and stood waiting on a raised path overlooking the high road under an arched wilderness of roses.

The Vicarage stood on a hill commanding the village, the path rose sheer above a green trellised gate, and formed a landmark in the neighbourhood.

Below in the hollow ran the stream which turned the mill; at the side of the winding road a green dimpled down stretched up to the edges of the high hills.

Through the break in the hills along the white road flanked by tall trees came the brave array of men and horses, on and on, up and down, in sun and shadow, a glimmer of burnished gold, a glint of molten silver, a shimmer of dense blue in the bright air.

They rode at ease at a smart trot. The soft silvern clash of a sabre; the roll of deep voices; the rhythmic melody of hoofs arose, hovering upon the breeze.

There was a debonnair magnificence in the spectacle; a fine barbaric earthly swing and swagger that set all Joan's pulses a humming.

She had seen from her school-room window soldiers on parade, at drill, but their machine-made movements and wooden faces had touched her not at all.

They had seemed to assimilate too nearly to the condition under which she herself was stiffening into a perennial "at attention" pose; and upon the occasion of any cere-

monial display of arms she and her governess were despatched in search of health or dairy produce in some direction where never a soldier swaggered.

Her glow of surprise therefore was absolute, her imagination was stirred to its depths. Her curiosity awoke, her courage rose, but a doubt beset her.

She made a swift little motion, as though to get back to the quiet house, but her fascinated eyes defied the bidding of her meek feet, and Beatrice's untrammelled voice fixed her.

"Indolent swagger cloaking tons of stored energy is the rippingest thing on earth, and so English," screamed Bee; "nothing of the waxed-end ferocity of the Germans and their waist lines half way up their abominable backs of some of the other peoples, about that crowd. Joan! wouldn't you like to see 'em with the thirst of blood on 'em," said this gentle Christian dreamily.

"Oh," gasped Joan, but the notion seized her. "It—really it would take the dullness out of death," she said presently, with some diffidence.

"Death! with all that life under your nose! Why will clergy people be always bringing in some engine of destruction? Death, or dirt, or drains, or dullness? Living in the country," she pursued, her eyes glued to the dazzling pageant, "demoralises you to the bone. For the sake of common decency there should be a cavalry barracks within easy reach of every neighbourhood." A glittering, but perplexing point of view, this! Joan looked breathless interest.

"To keep your sense of proportion right," vouchsafed Bee, sweeping in with one contemptuous gesture the whole county-side. "Nature and a dull neighbourhood make you so sloppy. Why! we're like a pair of housemaids this minute gaping at the soldiers."

"But—didn't you like soldiers in London?"

"I liked them in reason, thrown in among a lot of other appreciations. Here I could elope with one. I firmly believe every scandal worth the name is hatched in the country or the suburbs. Once set going, of course, it will thrive anywhere," she added hopefully.

"Do—do the usual things really stop amusing you soon?" asked Joan anxiously.

"Your enjoyment gets chastened. You sort things out, keep the best and look out for more."

"It sounds—like a succession of longings."

"Call it gathering experience. That sounds less morbid."

"And—when it's gathered?"

"Hem!—There's always forbidden fruit to fall back upon. It's a comprehensive term, although, indeed," she added sadly, "it narrows daily. Oh! I say, don't disturb yourself, Joan. It needn't necessarily refer to husbands. However, all that needn't trouble *you*. You're better as you are." She turned to bestow a hard, unconditional stare upon Joan.

The egoism of Beatrice, as will the most thriving, waved in the presence of the unattainable.

She was generous and cordial in her modified appreciation of her sister-in-law.

"You'll make a lovely old woman," said she, with a gusty sigh, "while I shall be tanned leather, with a hard-bitten nose. Getting ready for Heaven and a blessed old age suits you down to the ground."

Joan felt too prostrate to offer either disclaimer or protest.

"And to know that if circumstances hadn't, so to speak, shelved you, you'd have shone all right amongst ordinary sinners, you know, somehow gives you the right look. You're really very attractive, Joan—in a way."

"If she goes on much longer," thought Joan, "I am afraid I shall have to yell."

"Your face is an influence," pursued Bee. "Directly my guests see me, they'll feel easy in their minds. They'll be sure of a good dinner. Yours will straightway forget their dinner—I hope to goodness the wine also—and think of mothers' knees and prayer."

"Oh! Beatrice, Beatrice! I'm not like that?"

"Worse luck for the like of us, you are."

"Oh! If you only knew how hard you all make it for me—all of you, except Billy—to be even commonly good."

"That's your humility, dear. Ha! There are my two. I perceive the fatigue of over-experience in the off man's eye. Won't want to be set bucketting over new ground,

that gentleman. He'll prefer the known, with exceptional gifts to any ungifted exception. And George! The Church militant shows up really quite creditably. He looks quite human to-day."

She narrowed her gratified eyes to stare further. Joan's burst of winged words, held well in check, brought colour to her cheeks, spirit to her eyes; and roses and the frilled hat framed her finely.

As the destined guests looked up to salute, the younger experienced a thrill of great relief. Here was goodness looking precisely as goodness ought to look and never does.

He had been torturing his tender mind with a vague chaos of splay feet, square waist, pins upon a haggard bosom, a piece of tape fixed firmly between the teeth. A vision that in an all too recent youth he had been frequently called upon to kiss.

"I say, now, that's a ripping surprise," said the confiding young man to his senior. "I've been having night-mares of flannel petticoats and a basket, born-for-good-works-sort-of-business, you know. Pity, don't you think, that piety should run so often to thick ankles? Does one more good when it tapers at the points and smells of roses?"

"You'd better buck up, else your handful of beauties will be smelling of raw gin, and we'll have the Colonel raging again."

"Crumbs! Didn't he go it yesterday?"

"Wouldn't recommend you to let the smell of roses put you off seeing yourself after Reynard's hock, either, by the way. Swollen the size of your fist."

"Wonderfully nice little spot that Vicarage," mused the first lieutenant. "The kid in the background; the parson at the gate. The whole outfit, you know, and that white cowl of a thing on Mrs. Winnington's head. Joseph and Mary business, you know, brought up to date."

"And you, the wise young man from the East—also brought up to date. Shut up, and go attend to your Gee."

CHAPTER XVII.

OF all the creatures of wood and water, Joan best liked the birds with their dower of perennial youth, their hearts all full of song and sun. Everything of which she could get hold about them she seized and read delightedly. Lately she had fallen upon a treasure, and suddenly she began to hum it.

"New! new! new! new! Is it then so new that you must carol so madly," sang she. "But oh! The newness has got into my head," cried the foolish woman in a protest, "and it's all so utterly ridiculous."

With a laugh, half happy, half exasperated, she turned once again to look at the flash of diamonds upon her round, slim, young neck.

"And now for baby, and then for George," she murmured, tearing herself from the glass.

Ten minutes later, her face still alight with its triumphant surprise, she burst into George's room.

He was at his desk, his face luminous with thought, his eyes glued to a great sheet of lined paper, his pen racing.

He was absorbed body, soul, and spirit in some lofty utterance.

His face was indeed a wonder. This used to be the sort of thing for which Joan lived. Now there seemed no longer to be any room for her in the phase. She was shut clean out.

She stood still and inaudibly choked. George had forgotten everything but his Master's business. She had forgotten everything but the intoxication of her own newness.

Softly she turned to go away.

George knew of no Holy of Holies, however, that could

exclude Joan. To him the most natural thing in Heaven would have been Joan. For was she not part of Heaven?

With a swift, half glance that missed the diamonds, he called out to her:

"Oh, Joan! You always come just at the right moment. I've got a quotation here wrong. You can't insult a Father of the Church by misquoting him. The book is there, half way up the shelf, the fifth of that brown and gold row. The quotation is in the first seven chapters I'm pretty sure, and marked. It's low down on the left page I think."

Joan's fingers shook with the chill of disappointment as she reached up for the old volume full of bewildering / s's that meant s s's, and sat down to go patiently to and forth through the close printed pages, dog-eared and wedged one into the other viciously, as is the way of certain old tomes. But she found the lines.

"You'll like this," said George, making careful alterations. "It's the paper the Bishop wants for that controversy, and it must go to-night. I've been wanting to say the things for years. They would never come right, but now I've got 'em. They'd convince a wooden-headed clam! They must see the thing, those fellows, stop wrangling like old maids, and push on, push on!"

He spoke in the low, joyous tones, sweet with a beautiful sincerity, which Joan had never heard save upon a few occasions, visions and landmarks all in her little life. But just this one night, her own night, she wanted something different.

"There!" said George. "I can do no more! It must go. And now O! rare domestic censor, for your turn. Are you comfortable?" With beautiful unseeing eyes he glanced in her direction.

A thunderous knock crashed in upon George's fervent dream, awakening him to the fact that he was expecting guests; that the reason, indeed, for all his hot haste had been the imminent arrival of these guests.

"How abominably provoking," he cried. "You can't hear it after all!"

Full of regret, annoyance, and disappointment, without noticing a single new or memorable point about his suffering wife, George fled up by the back stairs to his dressing-room.

Laughing whilst she wiped her eyes, Joan stole out into the hall to get to her room and take off her baubles.

She was arrested upon the threshold of her resolve by old Jasper's roar of delight.

"God bless my soul! Turn round. Turn round, will you?" he repeated imperiously as Joan hesitated.

"A devilish pretty young woman. That's what you are! Cast the curatic slough now, for good and all! thank Heaven! In future, when I want to forget George's vagaries, for proof of his sanity, I've only got to look at his wife.

"Wish poor Isabella could see you," he murmured plaintively, "might make her hold her tongue in future about George's—ahem. Oh, well! What does George say?"

"He's been dreadfully busy. He was writing at full speed. He had to get the thing finished. Come into the drawing-room."

Jasper stared and groaned.

"God help us all. Who's to stand up against iced virtue? Seven and twenty in March, George. Hang it all! What will the unfortunate fellow be at fifty?"

All Joan's thoughts ran shivering off to fifty. She gave rather a scared little laugh.

"That—that sort of thing won't matter at fifty. Nothing will be new then any longer."

"To diet a girl who can stand diamonds like that on one dish," he muttered abstractedly.

"Oh, come!" said Joan.

She paused, caught her breath, and her dejected face lighted up all at once with a brilliant resolve.

"I'll simply make George see things," she thought. "I'll make him enjoy himself sensibly for once. What's the use of being magnificently happy if George isn't in it?"

"Come," said she, "and be ready for them. To-night I mean to do all the things just exactly right. I mean to match the family diamonds! Come!"

The first spark of coquetry, the desire to conquer, to prove her power, was now akindle in Joan, and she really was extremely new. She threw open the door, bright, smiling, excited, to come sheer upon George, who, having raced through his dressing, had got in by a side door.

For one instant the overmastering sense of George's sacrosanctity threatened to unhorse his wife's resolution,

the next she caught hold of her new strength and overcame her craven spirit.

She went straight up to George, her face dimpling with mute laughter.

The sight of her startled the vicar into an irritating silence.

"George," she cried at last, her low voice full of laughter, full of entreaty, "I feel so extraordinarily new. Just as if I was being born again. Oh! not in the right way—not like that in the very least. But that won't matter just for one night, George! Do say it won't. And look properly, do! Doesn't it make one look really awfully nice?"

She stepped back with a challenging face.

George laughed, but he also flushed. His wife stirred him in depths so far unmoved—by her. His whole being was one great surprise which throbbed oddly.

In spite of all his love, his trust, his nearness, he seemed only now to know Joan quite intimately. His blood raced through his veins like cool bubbling wine. A great tempest of youth swept him. He was a little afraid. Never till this moment had any note of fear jarred the melody of his pure, passionate, peaceful attachment, now the stirring of some odd discord, the new fear, the new shyness, made love a new delight.

"Miss Rebecca's diamonds aren't in it," said he, "it's yourself."

Jasper's points of view swung round with a bang, he felt immensely proud of George.

"No bread and butter miss there!" he averred. "Dashed handsome woman. By the way, George, I've been looking over my part of that marsh. It's quite time it was looked to. You might see to the thing. You strike me as being rather more practical than you used to be."

Joan's laugh was like merry music. She was laughing still when the two men came in, and in an instant the room was singing with youth. George yielded completely to the importunate demand in the air. Keen, subtle, vivacious, strong, he was ahead of them all. Not since the day that in his headlong way he had thrown his all, youth, body, brain and spirit into his sad, grave work, and grown silent with the silence of a strong heart filled with a keen sense of the pain of the world, an inexorable resolve to ease its

throbbings, had he so forgotten everything and let life swing free.

Joan with her spirited air, her joy in George's brilliancy, was a charming woman for any man to watch, whilst her frank admiring surprise at the sallies of the younger man—the odd appraising smile of the elder, seemed rather to stiffen spontaniety—her cordial appreciation of his glib renderings of the infantile wit of his circle, his discreet music-hall transposings, urged him to heights so far unattempted. Mrs. George Winnington's attitude of startled, grave, delighted *abandon* was a tribute to which he was but little used. The modern girl being generally far too zealous to cap a junior's jokes to find any leisure wherein to admire them.

Tom Thryng was, on the whole, a most engaging boy, founded upon frivolity and reverence, who mingled dreams with a healthy appetite. His passion for the Vicar's wife grew like Jonah's gourd. Directly dinner was over he took bodily possession of her. And George, who long before he had ever met Joan, had himself gone pleasantly through the pleasant phase, laughed amusedly, and fell into talk with Captain Heron.

Joan stood at the threshold of a new world, and watched with dazzled eyes.

"Look at her," murmured the enraptured Jasper to his doughty friend, Rebecca, loyal to his love, but suffering tortures from enforced abstinence. "And to-morrow she'll be dumped back upon her rôle of dog turning a praying wheel. This is a passing spasm on the part of George, but there will be no real going back for that girl. She's eaten of the Tree. The taste's on her palate. You can see it in the turn of her neck. The pride of life is in her, and the devil and all his angels." Jasper stooped forward to gaze. "A devil with all his bloom upon him. Lucifer, the Morning Star—with yearnings. He's less dangerous, believe me, in a tail. Her curiosity's excited, her hankerings all agog. Heavens only knows——" He declined tacitly to complete this dark saying.

"Hang it all," he exclaimed, after another glance. "I wish I hadn't promised to clear up that swamp."

"Did you promise?" she demanded sharply.

"Why, yes," murmured he.

"When did you promise?"

"To-night," he sadly admitted.

"I've grovelled before Jasper for the sake of those wretched people these twenty years, and my diamonds to do it in the end!" she reflected sadly.

"It was a sort of apology to the fellow," pursued Jasper, "for looking upon him so long as a hopeless ass. There's man enough about George, after all."

"Man! Is that all you know about George?"

He waved a comprehensive hand.

"Oh! You're thinking of the usual things. Pah! That's all part of the stock in trade of the modern saint. Why, even wine won't floor the latest brand. I've proved 'em; wisdom of the serpent business, don't you see? A straight eye for a woman is the one sure test, and that's where they wobble." He shook a sorrowful head. "Flavourless—*dévoté*—neutral mothers in Israel you don't want in your own family. George has bested the lot of us; defied our power of judgment. All the same I wish I hadn't been so glib with my promises. He'll be up to his neck in that swamp before the week's out. Why, his honeymoon wasn't over before he was in and out of these stinking vaults like a rabbit, the girl at his heels. I've brought a new unpleasantness into her dull life, that's all. Likely enough some malarious complaint."

Miss Rebecca shut her lips and tried with all her might not to hate Joan. It was all so unnecessary a ravishing of an old woman's last chance. Time was racing at full tilt and she was lonely in her big house.

She was a just woman, however, and in the course of many a sad vigil stood often aghast before the invincible bulwarks of an ugly old age. The bleak, unveiled age of the woman who has early lost the one great incentive towards mellow beauty, who, moreover, for sheer righteousness sake, as in the present instance, though with a wried mouth, has burnt her last boat symbolised in the homely form of a corset.

"How could a woman look in the glass," Miss Rebecca reflected with fierce humility, "and blame Jasper." At the same time, Jasper must be preserved from mawkishness.

"Never repent a good deed, Jasper," she counselled briskly. "Takes the virtue out of it. How's your gout?"

Jasper looked hurt, and stiffly stood up.

"Isn't confounded, flat-footed teetotalism enough for a man, Rebecca?" said he testily, "without reminding him of his other afflictions. 'Pon my soul, that young fellow's cheerfulness after a dry dinner, with no sense of religion to keep him going, is a great compliment to the girl. Come! we may as well have a look at George clothed and in his right mind. It isn't often we have the chance." But it was George's wife at whom he looked.

So once again did Rebecca yield to the inexorable cruelty of youth. She strode on beside Jasper, plumping finally down upon a backless seat, which her large person forthwith most destructively overflowed.

Miss Rebecca knew well—none better—the charitable seclusion of a big chair to be the one and only setting possible to regrettable abundance in shiny silk. Her choice of the bleak perch was her grim protest against the inevitable.

The spectacle she presented upon it, however, struck Jasper as being little short of indecent exposure.

He had a rooted distaste to any woman's making an exhibition of herself, but, she who at any period of her existence has touched a man's heart or flurried his emotions should, even in the lesser matters, live for ever after up to his former estimate of her.

Despite honest strivings it had become difficult for Jasper to preserve, in this matter, a magnanimous outlook. He was loyal in his way; his quarrel lay not with poor dear Rebecca, but with the unkindness of an inconsiderate and most inconsistent nature.

He hitched his chair within whispering distance of the creaking stool, thus at the same time satisfying his conscience and giving himself an opportunity of throwing out further notes of admiration upon the progress of Joan.

From chattering honest nonsense the two young people had now drifted into Comic Opera. Until this moment Joan had never come within touch of such a thing, but she was ripe for the spirit of light comedy and had been excellently drilled in music. She was playing, with the feathery touch of a girl to whom joy is an alive, young, elusive creature to be tenderly entreated, the score unearthed by young Tom from his baggage; sometimes she sang. And everything Joan did this wonderful evening, she did

with the sweet, quick spontaneous ways of a brown bird full of gracious modesty. When they had skimmed through the opera, Joan rose and turned quickly to George.

"Did you ever sing this sort of thing?" she asked eagerly.

He took up the music and turned over the leaves, humming snatches here and there.

"In my days we sang the grandfather of this—not a family trait left out. I daresay I could manage it. Do you want me to try?"

The face turned up to his puzzled George. There was some odd argument openly going on in it.

Joan, in fact, was fairly panting for George to sit down and wipe them all out, and get his rich resonant voice intoning the service rolled rebukingly through her frivolous ears.

Suddenly, looking rather proud, she caught the music out of his hand.

"On the whole, I don't think I do want you to sing it."

"Oh!" cried Fred, nodding at the music with a touch of disdain. "That's not up to George's form. When we were at York he dined with us one night, and after dinner he sang 'The Land of the Leal.' You never heard the like of it. There was a rumour that the Colonel fairly blubbed. Being Scotch, you know," he explained apologetically, "with a groggy heart. I say, Mrs. Winnington, you get him to sing now."

Joan looked blank. A new George was being unfolded to her by strangers under her very nose.

She had the utmost confidence in George's power to do anything, but never in all her life had she heard or imagined his angelic voice save in Church music. It disturbed and perplexed her. The things that to her seemed so urgent and absorbing he had seemingly swept with his ungrudging smile sheer out of his life. He could, it is true, pick them up again in an idle moment, but only to drop them without a thought, whilst every atom of her was shrieking and clamouring to live amongst the things, to touch them, to be one with them.

George, under no more poignant emotion than an amused appreciation of Joan's unspoilt delight in things he had half forgotten, laughed at the questioning of her bright face.

"Joan doesn't know half my accomplishments," he said, rummaging in an old portfolio. "We've been too busy since our marriage to show off before each other. For instance, I never heard my wife sing a comic opera catch song till ten minutes ago. Here, Joan, you'll play it just right."

"I always thought that portfolio held chants," said Joan, with a startled look.

George stooped as though to adjust her seat.

"You're lovely, child, to-night!" he whispered. "We're not dull, old married people at all. We're just starting out in the dew on our honeymoon. You and I, and the boy. Come—begin!"

There was a little hush when George had finished his song. With an odd eagerness he turned to scan the faces of his audience.

"I felt sure you'd like it," said he frankly. "One knows when one gets things right."

"Your singing at York was a fool to this," said Fred abruptly.

"I hadn't Joan to play for me then, nor the pair of you to score off. One needs peculiar incentives towards the attainment of the highest art."

He looked round with a laugh, but his eyes were keen and searching.

"Isn't there a lot of emotion in solution in the atmosphere," he said, still laughing as he looked down at Joan. "I thought that sort of thing had been cast out long ago. We mustn't let our dinner-party get dowdy. Fred, you take the floor, you can accompany yourself, can't you?"

Then, with a soft light upon his face, he went over to Joan who was now arranging a curtain so as to screen the old people from a draught.

Heron's silent, masked eyes turned to watch the pair.

Fred's voice roared lustily. Their privacy was complete.

"Oh! George!" she cried.

"That's how you make me write," whispered George; "not one of you will ever forget that song. And when you think of it you'll think straight."

His dark, warm face bent to hers a little. His eyes dilated with things that no mortal man has ever yet put into words, the face of a dreamer who can also fight—a

face luminous with transparencies, dim with mystery, bright with sympathy.

"George! Do you always sing like that?"

"Rather not. It's you, I tell you. As the book is you—as more peculiarly even, the sonnets are you. I want them—book and sonnets both, to ring in the hearts of men like a perfect melody. I want them to seize and sway men's hearts and senses as that song has done. To grip and possess them; and once in heart and brain to come back to nest there. They've got to do all this, too, I would have you to know, before we're done with them! Joan! There's doubt in your face and dismay! Is it the comparative failure of David that's troubling you, or of Isaiah or Daniel set against my astounding cheek? Don't you see that none of the mighty dead will tickle palates rank for novelty. They won't, at this hour of time, switch like a comet's tail through Mudie, nor be tossed about the tables of boudoirs and clubs and messes, nor be made even the subject of inane, profane mawkish chatter——"

"Oh! George, don't."

"But who or what has ever escaped? Not God, nor death, nor Hell, nor the Hereafter. And who's much the worse for the milling? There's a spark of truth in every fool, moreover, and the breath of God has set his heart beating. Anyway, folly is the sieve of truth, and the bits may be caught as they fall. Besides, there's a very fair average of wisdom in Mudie's customers, and in any case the whole creation groaneth and travaileth beneath the yoke of Mudie. It's to Mudie's customers we've got to offer our wares, whether they be of the flesh or of the spirit, not to saints and angels. We can only do what we *can*. And, after all, if a thing—poor as it may be—isn't fit to be offered to God, it's not worthy to be palmed off upon the least of Mudie's guinea subscribers."

There were tears behind Joan's eyes, now very quiet ones.

"He demands nothing," she thought, "from anyone, nothing—except from himself and from me."

"That the jaded palate of Mudie," George eagerly proceeded, "has lost its taste for the moment, for the prophets and the stars that sing together, is no argument. We all want reminding. And a mouse, even without you to help him, has done in his time what floored a lion!"

Joan's eyes were fixed upon him.

"What a face!" thought she, a perfect protest of awe in hers. "What a face! The only wonder is that he can stand me at all after Heaven—as he sees it."

Pride and a sense of unworthiness strove together in her limpid eyes.

"Fred's at his last stave," said George abruptly. "We've been outrageously rude, only luckily he hasn't found us out. Hadn't we better leave the immensities?"

Joan's face kindled and went out. "One can't in a moment," she protested. She was breathing rather quickly. "I—I wanted to—just commonly enjoy myself this whole evening." She laughed tremulously, "and make you do the same—and not care, not care in the very least. Now you've brought in Cathedral music all at once, and—fairly flooded me with it. I don't feel right any more in a low-bodied dress. And nothing—nothing, nothing could ever explain to you how happy I was when first I came down in it. I spent an hour this afternoon cutting it lower."

"My dearest, what have I done? Why, I'm lost in admiration of you. Am I a prig after all?"

"George! You're yourself! Oh, George! if you'd just for once sit opposite the glass and look at yourself properly, and then get on with the book, you'd write things so beautiful, so amazing, that you'd make the whole world fairly ache."

George whistled.

"Narcissus with a vengeance! But I don't want to make the world ache, I want to make it—love."

"But think of all the ache there is in loving."

"Do you know this is a dinner-party, not psychology."

Detached from the things of earth though George might be, he yet knew when to change the subject.

"I wish I had you to myself to-night," he said tenderly. "I have tons of work in me. However, we've got a world of to-morrows before us!"

Joan looked down and saw just what she had expected to see. The fingers of his pen hand moving nervously. George had all the extravagant horror of waiting of the spiritual enthusiast with a gift unchecked by time or tribulation.

The wife of the seer swallowed a sigh.

"That perch," said the more adaptable George, "has a disastrous effect upon bulk, and Miss Rebecca looks pinched in the midst of her abundance. I must dislodge her and pack her into a chair. She's certainly depressed. Too bad of you to be edging her out of his faithless heart in the shameless way you're doing."

"Is it *that*?" said Joan, all eyes.

"It's *that*. Why, it's an old story."

"Oh! George! I know—but—" cried she, "we must make it a *new* one."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE quiet intensity and fierce fire compact in George's face, the loving, adoring, admiring, impatient protest in Joan's, during their stolen talk in the window, amused and interested Heron. But it was the queer elusive likenesses he was finding in this vicar's wife to a woman worlds apart, whose faithless hand still held all the joy and the hope and the despair of his life, that fixed his attention. For, indeed, he had lately been himself through deep and muddy waters, and had hardly yet recovered from his drenching.

But for Fred's urgency he would have refused George's invitation off hand, very much preferring to have put up at the Inn with his quiet pipe.

He had had more than enough of love, and love amidst vicarage roses did in no sort of way suit his mood.

The contradictions to these sylvan surroundings that peeped subtly through the queer relations of the clerical pair had now, however, aroused his curiosity. And the instinct of a born sportsman to stand aside and find out the rules of a game new to him, kept it alive.

The extraordinary baffling innocence of the girl's outlook struck him as, so to speak, inexpedient upon the part of a saint's wife. His sharp eyes had, moreover, detected in her a hint of an immature violence that held possibilities, and ousted his initial suspicion of insipidity.

"Hem!" he thought. "How is that now? A holy well or a volcano? Any way, to Winnington, she's 'a well of sweet waters' upon which he draws generously."

He moved lazily from the door, against which he had been leaning, with a vague intention of making still more definite investigations, but only yawned listlessly when Fred swooped down and balked him.

What did it matter after all? He had had his fill both of women and of eruptions.

He turned with sudden sharp scrutiny to look at George. He at least held no volcanoes, and in the white flame of his quiet zeal there was a fine attraction.

To a man (as judged by himself) chilled, tired, sceptical, experienced, such illimitable simple faith as George's; such quenchless fires of zeal; such an undimmed power of restrained emotion, offered a boundless field for speculation.

Moreover, the dramatic instinct as strong in George as his absolute unconsciousness of it amused Heron vastly.

He grinned behind his powerful nervous hand as he watched George after he had finished his astonishing song; watched the proud, pure, spiritual eyes—the man himself coming in nowhere—not at all—as they went round serenely, keenly, and impersonally searching each listener's face in turn.

Heron felt a chuckling conviction that had the song missed fire, George, without a moment's hesitation, would have sung it again. The song for obvious reasons must be an event, the singer mattered nothing.

Some three years before, when he was just twenty-five, two events had come clattering into Heron's normal agreeable life that wried many of his points of view; shook his faith in women and broke up all the other faiths so pitifully dependent upon this elemental overmastering one.

The mother whom he had worshipped after an arrogant, protective, jealous fashion; with whom all his life he had been half in love, had abruptly and with precipitate haste run off with a man Rob knew to be a skunk, and even duller at heart than his corpulent, droning, egregious father.

In his intolerable proud young despair Heron turned to the girl he was practically engaged to. Pouncing upon the maternal escapade for her excuse, flushed, and in tears, the young lady pleaded her religious convictions, and the state of her mother's heart, and in order that

there might be no falling back married forthwith into another regiment.

Affections and passions unquenched and unsatisfied thus thrown violently back upon him, the only thing left for Rob to do was to hold his tongue and fill up the vacant hours.

So a silence fell upon him and he took to work.

Not that work seemed altogether worth while, but, unlike sport, it was always with you, and it shut off women. That was well, but the dogged, absorbed way in which Rob took his work also shut off men rather more than was altogether good for him. Moreover, he exchanged laughter for an inward chuckle; a change in a man's ways irritating to those of his kind with normal mothers and a moveable taste in girls.

The honest suggestions of sympathy of his friends jarred upon the intense pride and the deep fiery nature of Heron. To be the public victim of feminine duplicity was bad enough, but when a dishonoured and adored mother comes into the business any touch upon it grows intolerable.

Heron's pride was far too stubborn to suggest the advisability of an exchange and a refuge in India or elsewhere. He declined tacitly to budge an inch.

He would avoid any suggestion of the thing as he would the devil, but he'd see it out amidst his old comrades.

A reticence that holds the best part of a man's life must of necessity build up a barrier between man and man.

Gradually, but surely, was Heron cutting himself out of a merry life.

Fred Thryng, his distant cousin, had his own opinion of the girl episode. What after all are girls to any man until one of them has set him aching? But he, too, had been in love with the small winsome mother, and so he repudiated silences, ignored rebuffs, and calmly went on with his friendship. And after a little Rob fell back into the old deep cut grooves, and as time went on, as the favourite of his commanding officers, received with polite serenity the attentions of their innocent womenkind. It was no more fatiguing after all than tracking the windings of red tape.

Moreover, as everything comes to him who cares not a jot whether it does or not, he had got his chance and

used it in a six weeks' scrimmage in West Africa, which in the lack of more important happenings had not been overlooked by a hurried nation. Heron got the D.S.O. out of it.

But he was lonely under his languor, for no man can throw off the dead weight of passions congealed, not scotched, nor whilst carrying it, very especially enjoy himself.

To find haunting suggestions of his mother, of all created women, in a country vicarage drawing-room, seemed to have recalled Rob to a world upon which he had turned his back.

Under no circumstances could Mrs. George Winnington's chestnut eyes deride him with the petulant, elfish, brilliant challenge of his mother's sapphire ones. Nor had she a trace of that mother's distracting, adorable, horrifying wit. But the bird-like, smooth, swift movements of the girl; her bird-like liquid voice, full of its naïve, astounding youth, her eager, soft, breathless taking of pleasure, above all the extraordinary gleams of hostility that his sharp experienced eyes had detected more than once in her frank betraying ones were traits full all of a disturbing significance, a horrid familiarity.

And the hostility—to what? to whom? Certainly not to the husband she so wistfully adored. Yet it was more especially during their quick eager whispered conference in the window—her's and George's—the stolen meeting of lovers—that he had caught the unforgettable, unmistakable sign.

His mother perplexingly mixed up with Joan followed Heron to his room.

He threw open all the latticed windows, to see what roses and nightingales could do for him.

They seemed to be part and parcel of the thing. Fit setting to that soft throbbing inexorable note of revolt against something—so pitiful, so cruel, so impalpable and pursuing that good women keep hidden decently in their own hearts and the others shriek from the house tops.

Any sane man will shut his ears to feminine howlings and flee for his life, so that it is only the few who have been pierced to the quick by the note in its minor key who will recognise and pause to consider it.

This destroying note seemed to haunt Heron and to

harry him. He fell asleep, his mother's entrancing laugh in his ears. A vision of George on a gridiron smiling with lofty enjoyment at Mrs. George, pinned by two devils and crying in a silent, hopeless passion of grief, awoke him at an unearthly hour.

"Is this country air," he thought angrily, "or the devil."

To judge by the crowing of cocks, the distant sonorous rooting of swine in the wood; the imbecile arrogance in the cackle of a hen; the explosive fussiness of the rookery, it was the country. But the devil was in it.

Rob cut himself in shaving twice, found the diminutive bath insufficient, and had a premonition of family prayers.

He slipped stealthily down the stairs and out by a side door to smoke himself back into a civilised temper.

As he smoked moodily in a seat behind a thick yew tree, suddenly through the heavy green of the low branches he was aware of George in his study, his face, for the time of day, annoyingly radiant, interested, alive, absorbed in some writing. The sight fascinated Rob. And the longer he looked the more patent did the contradictions in George's face become; the dominant, commanding, acute nose, the sensitive, sweet, inexorable mouth, the high, narrowish, perpendicular brow, satanically proud and saintly humble. The odd, pushing onward look in the eyes that saw a deal too much, a deal too little.

The thing which especially struck Rob was the queer, sudden fetchings up that seemed to come upon George. When he wanted a book, for example, or a paper; sometimes plainly a word—a suggestion. At these moments the radiance seemed to wane, and George frowned and grew humanly irritable.

Sometimes he got back to his better mood in rather a clumsy way.

"Oh! That's it is it?" said Heron, "he wants *her*." He looked at his watch. "6.30 a.m. Poor Egeria!"

"By Jove," he said, suddenly lifting himself up and strolling down the path, "didn't strike me till now that this is eavesdropping."

Joan, too, had risen early for her usual hour with her baby free of infection, duty, stress, and the clinging disturbing scent of the poor. And, suddenly, because she simply must be young in some visible form, a quick, lilt-

ing dance tune that she had sung the night before sprang to her lips. With that she began to dance and the child to shout.

Joan had been taught her steps by one of the wooden instructors, but nature had taught her grace. She was a born dancer. Her face alight, her deep dimples full of sunlight, her eyes of smiles, she danced in all the liberty of her powers under the red roses.

Heron just turning the corner halted to watch her.

It was as innocent and gracious and womanly as dance could be, but it set Heron frowning.

George's face under a lustrous nimbus fell to jigging up and down in his brain.

The passionate abandonment of George's wife to the sheer physical joy of living seemed out of place somehow, a discord, an offence, and yet it sent his pulses humming.

And then all at once his hard, keen face softened in a great compassion.

It seemed hard upon Joan that any display upon her part of purely earthly gratification should invariably send her friends away sorrowful.

Heron whistled softly. "Eavesdropping again," said he. "There's something dangerous in the air of primeval vicarages. This infernal place makes you feel like a malefactor."

He moved stealthily away, discreetly quenching his pipe. "What will the next move be?" he wondered, leaning over the old wall that bound the churchyard.

A limping widow-woman, an old, old man, and a smock-frocked sexton gave him at last the clue.

"Early service," said he, "as I'm a sinner. I wonder if the dance is done. Is she adaptable by any chance? Can she make a luxury of religion? Some women can. But she's a wood nymph. One can't imagine a wood nymph frisking in a shadow land of roses at a seven o'clock service conducted by her husband."

He turned and cautiously approached the long arch of roses, just as Joan was handing her baby to the small nurse and decorously smoothing down her dress. She was sober enough now. Heron could detect an anxious-to-oblige look in her small face.

"Why didn't that young ass Fred get up and take her for a walk?" he thought resentfully.

"Good morning," said she, "and, oh! I hope you aren't very hungry. I can't give you breakfast for quite half an hour."

"But I don't want breakfast. I'm going to Church."

With a shyness, an odd suggestion of maternal ferocity about it, she scanned his face.

She had hoped rather that Fred would have been down to help her with the singing, he went quite well somehow with a family pew and a flower in his button-hole, but this—this was another thing altogether.

"If you're coming, we've only just got time," she said primly.

Heron, behind her in the narrow path, remembered the sun on her hair as she was dancing, and laughed under his breath.

"Does she feel, I wonder, that her frock fits outrageously, and would rather I didn't look? She has the oval of the mother's cheek. The mother, however, would have turned round and changed all my points of view superbly. *She's afraid.*"

Here Joan caught sight of George hurrying on before them. A nervous movement of her hands, a proud lift of her head, a quick flush, enlightened Heron.

"Looking upon me as a scoffer is she, then? A woman with none of the nonsense knocked out of her will believe anything of a man," he thought, with sudden resentment. "She wants bringing to her senses."

"Mrs. Winnington," said he in his most impassive voice as he strolled on in her rear, "I firmly believe that you're being puffed up by spiritual pride. It's a snare, a bad one, too, I'm told."

She flew round like a bird and they stood facing each other on the path.

"Won't you give any one but yourself any credit for a little common sense and a gleam of insight? You can't expect to be reserving to yourself all the rights in a man like Winnington. He's not your monopoly. He's a beacon set on a hill and belongs to the age; to the least of us as to the greatest."

Her bewildered face tickled him. He paused to laugh,

and remembered suddenly that the last time he had really laughed was at some wild extravagance of his mother's, also uttered between two privet hedges.

"I wonder if I ought to apologise to her?" he thought rapidly. "I'm going to Church, Mrs. Winnington, at this early hour not to mock, I would have you to know, but to find out what a lover of perfection can do with words which have lost their savour for the most of us, and unless you move on we'll be late."

"I'm sorry," she said, gravely and simply, slowly turning. "But a woman called him a 'gilt pill' the other day."

"A neighbouring parson's wife, eh?"

"Yes," was the solemn reply.

"Oh! She'd say anything. Daresay she has cause, poor soul, in the Trial upon her own hearth-stone."

"A man clothed upon with righteousness," he thought, grinning into his hat. "Wonder if she's up to his weight. If she's not he'll never be the one to find it out," he thought presently, when George had finished his daily five minutes of bright, beautiful words, that would have made Silenus himself decide for the moment for decent living, that made clean hands and a pure heart the most simple and natural things in the world.

"Did he by any chance preach for me or at me or around me?" inquired Heron as they came back.

A sharp touch of her submerged quality rang in Joan's voice. "It would never strike George to raise or lower his standard for any one. And yet they all understand all he says, absolutely."

"By Jove! a pianette in a school-room is good enough for the parsons one generally happens upon. But it's only organ music and a Cathedral that would fit such splendid simplicity as Mr. Winnington's."

With a dim suspicion that he'd find her eyes blazing he turned to look at Joan. They outshone his mother's at their brightest, and had as vast an outlook.

"Oh! You'd like that sort of thing? A Cathedral and the organ business."

"I—I should like it—but it would never strike George."

"No," he said dryly. "It would never strike him, but it might happen."

Her face breathed mute denial.

"There have been, in the course of history, great saints gloriously apparelled."

"There have," she meekly admitted. "How hungry you must be."

CHAPTER XIX.

"I'LL tell you now," said Fred pensively, as he stood beside his hostess in the window, "that when George asked us yesterday to come to you, I was in a blue funk. I hadn't seen him, you see, since he changed over, but I'd met his sisters, and they spoke of him in rather a death-bed way, you know. I was prepared for anything."

"Even to do without wine for dinner?"

"Rot! As though George could do anything else when he'd promised the fellow. A big loss to the service, is George, that's what he is—I say, I beg your pardon. But if you see a real man going to waste, your first idea is to rake him into your own shop. I daresay, when *you* see a likely chap you'd give your eyes to sweep him into yours."

"I?" cried Joan, "I certainly should not."

This for a parson's wife struck Fred as odd. He stared at his shapely feet. What weren't solemn convictions upon things in general in Mrs. George appeared to be doubts.

The solemn convictions, being the first he had met in a drawing-room, he set aside for future consideration. To the doubts he felt rather drawn. They were refreshing in a cock-sure age, and gave oneself a chance.

"You see," Joan explained, "if you don't like the things George does just as you ought to do, it would—I can imagine that it would be extremely easy to hate them just exactly as you ought not to. In this, it's all or nothing."

"But," said Fred cheerfully, "that's the way with every honest trade. If it's not all, it's generally nothing."

"There's the most extraordinary difference, really. You've got to live in it to know."

"Oh, well," said Fred soothingly, "nothing's all beer and skittles."

Joan looked at George and blushed. Fred's eyes followed her.

"I—I really—I beg your pardon."

"Oh, but don't." Her face took on the sudden, proud look that seemed to Heron from the other side of the room to sit like a coronet on the small brown head. "Vicar's wives aren't the Church; you shouldn't judge the Church by—by the blots on it."

The full significance of the weird protest broke out slowly upon Fred.

"Good Lord!" he muttered.

"It's quite, quite different from other—honest trades," she assured him.

She looked uncommonly interesting, but this wasn't the sort of thing to further conversation. Fred wriggled.

Joan felt guilty. Vanquished, as usual, by the pressure of the High Calling of George, she could only think of the usual things. Careless joy and the Comic Opera seemed centuries away.

The door opened, and a maid broke the spell.

"Brought by a trooper, sir," she proudly announced, presenting Fred's Captain with a note.

The Vicarage household was caught up in the general excitement, and a red and blue warrior towering huge amidst the roses in the porch had set its pulses thumping.

"Everything's gone wrong at the Barracks," said Rob, "and we've got to stay here a day or so longer. But we won't bother you, Mrs. George, of course. There's the Inn handy. Only you'll let us come in now and then, won't you?"

"You don't escape us like that," cried George. "You must certainly stay here, if you can put up with meat without drink."

"But we'll be interrupting you."

George thought of Joan's face and her sweet, new ways.

"We like to be interrupted," said he.

Joan thought of George's twitching fingers.

"You must stay with us," said she eagerly to Heron. "But we'll go on just as usual. You can smoke when we're busy. You won't miss us, really."

"I don't know about that," said Fred, in a dejected voice. "But we can take a look at the country."

"And practise the forbidding virtue of self-denial," said his senior, with a laugh. "If you'll have us, Mrs. Winnington, we'll be delighted to stay."

* * * * *

It was common property in and around the village of Thryng that every derelict in it counted time by the comings of Mrs. George. Thus it was that Mrs. Worrall, who hove in sight just as Joan disappeared within a notorious threshold, uttered a "bother," with the vim and virulence of a "damn."

She had arrived with a brimming budget of news, which, when discharged, she designed to refill and bring back to Peter, held by a funeral sermon in his study.

Mrs. Worrall never returned empty, and she had many fixed principles, the most fixed amongst them being, perhaps, a resolve to neglect no opportunity. Her first impulse, therefore, when loose in a parish other than her own, was to prowl round upon the track of abuses.

Lifting her eye-glasses, she now perceived some suspicious transaction going on in the churchyard. She strode up the path, took a seat upon a low tomb-stone, to find the sexton digging a grave in the last spot allowed to a conservative people by a despotic government.

"I'm astonished at Mr. Winnington's permitting such practices," burst out the lady at last, with lifted eye-glasses, keeping time with her umbrella to the dull thuds of the spade. "The dead in the midst of the living! An absolutely disgusting anachronism."

Mrs. Worrall thought highly of the value of long words as applied to the working-classes.

Diggins paused to let every trace of intelligence drop from his wizened visage.

"Naw, marm. There you be wrong. T'ent infectious. Gospel truth, naught but old Deborah Jones an' her rheumatics. An'," he jerked his head, seemingly to include the powers that be, "an' we're well within the law, that we be."

"The law isn't common sense. The law isn't modern science. Where does this place drain?"

Diggins jabbed stolidly at a stone, and looked, if possible, more vacant than before.

"Danged if I know, marm. Vicar'll tell 'ee."

She snorted.

"That grave is not the legal depth."

"Noo act, marm. Fashions in graves like other things. Don't put 'em in tiers on this 'ere propputy like in the towns, or like 'twas in th' old Vicar's time."

Rapt and caught up in professional memories, he paused to wipe his brow.

"Mawny's the time an' a moonlight night we've gone out, Vicar an' me an' the red tarrier, a prodden o' the copses."

"Good gracious!"

"To locate 'em," he mumbled, digging diligently. "So we didn't shove the nextes too close on t'other, a trick as has been sar'd on mawny a copse. Goes agin you, summow, t'hustle a copse. An' wi' onsasoned deal, an' pore work, niver no tellin'."

"My man—pray explain yourself."

"See 'ere, marm. 'Tis like this, now." He glanced indulgently at her simplicity, and proceeded to demonstrate the matter on his spade handle. "A sharp dink o' steel at t'head of a long pole, a stable-broom handle, as you might say, ony med o' puppus to prod amid the copses. See it in t'hold vestry, marm. A sarvival, the young Vicar do call it. Rare proud he be, too; shows it hoff to Bishops an' the like. Mrs. George, she don't like it. T'ent a lady's fancy, summow."

Having dismissed the matter, he bent down again to his grave.

Mrs. Worrall rose, flung a curt good-day over her shoulder, and thumped down the path.

"I knew it," she muttered. "I knew it in spite of Peter's maunderings. All flash and glitter. Ignorance and grossness as rampant as in the darkest hour of the Dark Ages. The Parish matches the Hall." She sniffed high-mindedly. "Defend me from those writing Parsons. Poetic brow, indeed, and breeding typhoid in his own parish."

"That Spanish grandmother ruined the Winningtons. The blood of foreign play actresses is not what the Church wants. Thank God, anything introduced into it upon my part or that of Peter can only work for Good."

In travail with a cankering conviction that George Win-

nington had distinctly seen her at Aiken not a week ago, and, thereupon, had incontinently scurried down a lane, Mrs. Worrall had forgotten her enthusiasm for holy zeal, and had that moment a rod in pickle for the "so-called" saint's wife.

"Will the girl never come?" she irritably thought.

Meanwhile, his uninvited guest having turned her back upon him, the light of a fairly astute intelligence returned as by a miracle to the countenance of John Diggins.

"Thank the Lard I've scattered t'hold besom," he grunted. "Her can sow strife in her own parish, her can, an' lave oun." He chuckled solemnly, and spat on his palms, preparatory to resuming work. "Talk o' vaults an' dry rot, or Satan or the shadder o' death an' the worm, or the moth an' rots, fools the lot ov 'em to they ferritin' clargy wummen. A steamin' down she be naw on little Mrs. George, like a grit road-ingin."

The lady was, indeed, sheer upon Joan, an uplifted watch in one large, ungloved hand. For sanitary reasons Mrs. Worrall went gloveless amongst the poor, and even in midsummer wore a black, glazed, germ-proof, sailor hat.

"Twenty minutes in one cottage," she cried. "My dear Mrs. Winnington, I envy you your leisure. Five is my maximum, unless, indeed, it's a question of open sin. In that case, I give fifteen, gladly. It couldn't be that sort of thing there. Stephen Black is well on in senile decay, and his wife is on the verge of it."

"They dislike being hurried."

"Dee—ar lady. If we begin to think of their likes and dislikes, where are we likely to end?"

"I wish I knew," said Joan to herself, with a helpless look. "That's just exactly it."

"What we've got to do—— Ah! you're turning here—it's my way also. What we've got to do is to think of what's good for them and possible to us. There are only twelve hours in the day, and with meals and your family, where will you be?" The lady, when instructing ignorance, frequently neglected elegance of speech.

"Twenty minutes to two people whose time for repentance is past, *I* call wicked waste of energy. Wait, my dear young friend, until you have a few more children. Directly I found that by God's will it seemed likely I

should have a baby every eighteen months, I arranged accordingly, thus cutting short, from the very start, either grumbling or false hopes. System, Mrs. Winnington, is as necessary in your parish as in your kitchen."

"But the kitchen belongs so absolutely to yourself."

"And if the parish doesn't belong to yourself, I'd like to know who it belongs to."

"I always feel as though I belonged to the parish," said Joan, half meek, half amused.

"False modesty, Mrs. Winnington, and ruination to the poor. Fills them with airs and graces and vapouring wants; and then, no doubt, you're surprised at a general tone of slackness."

"No," said Joan serenely. "I expect it."

"Then it's your duty to cast the evil thing out. You must speak as one with authority, or—excuse me—you'd better stay at home." She paused to consider. "You must spend a day with *me*, Mrs. Winnington. Tuesday, washing; Wednesday, young girls' class; Thursday, factory; Friday, old women's tea. I have no hesitation in putting *them* off. Say Friday, then."

"But they'll be so horribly disappointed. I had to do it once for two days, and found that the delay made them suffer tortures."

"Pampering stomachs and high falutin' notions," said this mother of the diocese, "never saved a soul. Mr. Winnington, I can see clearly enough, has been infecting you with his ideals—as he has—ahem!—more or less—been infecting all of us. You can't idealise the Poor. And very lofty ideals when unchecked may become tarnished with much mischief—producing unpracticality and some carnal pride. I do not, of course, allude to your dear husband," she cried, with suspicious alacrity. "I am thinking of a dear young relative just taken priest's orders, connected with the Dean of Slough, and £300 a year from his mother—who, through excess of zeal, has lately spread scarlet fever through a crowded parish."

"She's impervious to hints," thought Mrs. Worrall pensively. "Possibly a fact may rouse her."

"By the way, do you know—but of course you don't—that the poor, dear squire has again broken out?"

Joan started and flushed.

"He dined with us last night," said she tamely.

"A man can do much after eleven o'clock. Mr. Winnington has not been idle. Seeing obvious signs of disturbance at the second keeper's cottage—a stupid, surly man, from whom one could gather nothing—I went on to the third keeper's wife—she turns my sheets and fills mattresses, a most respectable woman. What I heard alarmed me so that I thought it my duty to call at the Hall. The language of your father-in-law I shall never forget."

Joan, with great presence of mind, uttered a non-committing murmur, then turned an unmoved face to her tormentor.

George, as it happened, had not seen the lady at Aiken, but *she* had, and since George had an important sermon to preach that day, she had shamelessly hurried him into a place of safety.

"This is her revenge," thought Joan hurriedly, "but in spite of it, she means lunching with us, and I don't intend to ask her. She needs George's influence badly, no doubt of that, but simply I can't, and you can't even describe her to George as you—you feel her." She sighed, and glanced hastily at the glittering hat. She had begun lately to snatch little secret joys, into which it was not for the like of George to enter.

"I can't ask her," Joan again told herself, "and I must get to the Hall before George does."

Mrs. Worrall did, indeed, mean lunching at the Vicarage. She had put off an exhortation upon ventilation to a faggot of palsied age to enable her to do so, and find out who precisely the Vicarage visitors were.

"Are you really going to ask me over for a day, Mrs. Worrall?" inquired Joan sweetly, but with a guilty flush.

Mrs. Worrall divined what she was after, and bridled.

"Will you allow me to write, Mrs. Winnington? I need hardly say that my time is subject to many interruptions."

"Oh! I know it is. Please arrange some day yourself. But now I think I must say good-bye. I have several things to see to, and you won't want probably to climb that hill."

This precisely was what Mrs. Worrall did want to do.

As became the controller of the human nature in an important parish, she was blessed with magnificent eyesight. And, at the top of the hill, leaning idle against a fence, obviously lying in wait, her eyes had just beholden a young man. That the gross spectacle was equally patent to Joan she did not for a moment doubt. The grateful incense of iniquity rose delicately to the nostrils of Mrs. Peter Worrall.

"I am an excellent walker," she said haughtily. "I shall be quite glad of a little fresh air. It is so seldom that I allow myself a morning walk unconnected with parochial duties."

"Doesn't see him yet," she thought. "Not she! And not even to mention her visitors! The first in her life, probably. Catch the Colonel opening *his* door to—wolves. In spite of Peter, I knew she was deep."

"Oh!" cried Joan, "there's Fred Thryng, George's cousin. He's waiting for me."

"Obviously."

"They'll be with us longer than we thought. Until Saturday, perhaps, even Monday."

"Indeed."

("Having failed to hoodwink me, my fine lassie is now trying conciliation.")

"The soldiers seem to be off somewhere this morning. They look so well about the village. The people are so pleased."

("This, then, is the simplicity Peter makes idiotic remarks about. Simplicity!")

"Let us hope their pleasure may not bring gnashing of teeth in its train. My husband and I have been feeling deeply concerned for Mr. Winnington."

"But they're wonderfully picturesque, and really quite sober," pleaded Joan.

"Spectacular effects have, I fear, but an indifferent effect upon village morality. A set of pleasure-seeking idlers with loose minds in and out of *presumably* decent homes! My dear Mrs. Winnington, I *know* the Poor."

"Oh!" exclaimed Joan, with a flush with which the poor had but little to do.

"Yes?" demanded Mrs. Worrall.

"It's not Fred Thryng. It's Captain Heron."

"I see."

Joan presented her visitor to Mrs. Worrall.

"I felt sure you'd come back this way," said the carnal loafer.

"It was quite by chance, then. I generally come the other way. I thought you were Fred at first."

"Fred's gone recruiting with that fine soldier, Miss Rebecca."

"Oh! Is she here?"

"Been prowling round drilling the boy, and taking professional notes. She pumped me dry. Sort of caged-lion look about her. By the way, I believe she wants you."

"Miss Rebecca is no doubt worried."

Mrs. Worrall's voice thrilled solemnly.

"Shouldn't have taken her to be of the worrying sort," said Heron, his fascinated eyes upon the hat.

"There are times when not to be worried may mean callousness," said the lady oracularly.

Joan's cheeks were scarlet.

"She means to explain him in detail," she reflected precipitately. "Nothing will stop her now, and nothing will induce me to listen to her."

With the courage of despair she turned with flashing eyes to Heron.

"Mrs. Worrall doesn't approve of soldiers," she explained. "She won't allow even that they improve the landscape, so as I've got things to do that simply must get done, and at once, I'm going to leave her to you to convert, and I'll say good-bye and run—literally run. I'll have to race, in fact. Mrs. Worrall," said she, her spirit mounting, "I know you won't mind, for, as you very rightly say, the rules of society must always give way before clergymen's wives."

Her conscience a lump of lead, her heart light with malicious glee, Joan was off, carrying with her a pleasant memory of Heron's laughing, protesting face; her adversary reduced to a glaring silence.

All at once her conscience swung free as her heart.

"It's delightful doing wrong and having no remorse," she panted, running like the wind, so as to reach her goal from the direction opposite to that now floating in the enraged consciousness of Mrs. Worrall.

"And being hungry with ducks for luncheon! It's all

delightful together. And Captain Heron will rescue himself all right. He wants no help from me."

The pause to open a side gate into the park brought Joan to her senses.

For a long time now there had existed a tacit compact between Joan and Rebecca, that upon these melancholy occasions when the devil entered into Jasper, the younger woman should be the ambassador between the three houses concerned in the tragedy.

A quaint barricade of maidenly reserve, indestructible by time, tears or weather put it quite out of the question for Miss Rebecca to descend in bodily presence upon Jasper's hearth-stone, even to bring his sin home to him. To violate this piteous convention would have shivered the very foundations of Miss Rebecca's sense of delicacy. It was the last fragrant touch of youth in her heart; which, to be sure, is a thing whereunto a woman, if she be wise, should hold fast to the day of her death.

"To think of her prowling round helplessly this whole morning," thought Joan, still running at full speed, "while he's debasing himself. I hope I'll be in time. I hope I'll be there and back before George gets him on his mind—spiritually. The only single solution for all of us, is for them to marry. And the only obstacles—a moustache and me! If only he's sober enough I'll begin to-day."

The next minute she was walking sedate and unruffled up the drive.

"Thank the Lord!" said the old butler, "you're fust, ma'm. Why he should start this time there's no fathomin'."

The sounds of fury, which upon Joan's entrance seemed to bulge through the door, suddenly ceased.

"T'aint so much body drunk, Mrs. George, as his mind. Not t' obscure it, Lord help us, no! but summow to let loose a avalanche, as you might say, o' wits like razors; seems as if he must throw it off or bust. Two grooms had a good three months' earnins this mornin' afore light. The second keeper he had his'n at ten-thirty, the stable boys kem in at the heel o' the hunt. An' all had the interest laid on. It's too sharp he be," groaned Higgins, "both brain and tongue, God help us."

"Higgins, did he say anything very particular to Mrs. Worrall?" anxiously inquired Joan.

He scratched his worried head. "I'm bound to say it was a bit particular, ma'm, but wonderful reasonable. Dratted little folly in the poor Squire's ravins. He'd drive the truth into a wooden peg, would the Squire, once he's started," he murmured, gloomily leading the way to a splutter of sound apparently shot through a window. "An' the gun-room it must be," he pursued, dejectedly hobbling on in advance of Joan, "open to the ears of all. He did use to fancy the library which gave you a chance to keep things retired."

When Joan went in, Jasper, with a most sinful air of enjoyment, was sipping his grog.

By this time had he ventured to stand up he must undoubtedly have fallen.

Unwashed, unshaven, he sat in his evening clothes, tie twisted, face of a lively crimson, his white hair in disorder. The blood-shot, fierce old eyes, however, gleamed out shrewd, diabolical mockery. His shoulders were squared, his bearing erect, his great handsome hands steady, his invincible wicked old brain as clear as a pool.

There was a terrible intellectuality underlying this organised debauch, a superb, excellent, analytical grasp of all and every side of it.

"My little daughter-in-law herself!" he roared, with a genial laugh. "Can't get up, my dear—gout, we'll call it, eh? Come on your own account or George's?"

"On my own account," said Joan with serenity, taking off her hat and gloves in the leisurely way that always pleased the Squire, and sitting unaccusingly down beside the spirit-stand.

"George doesn't know unless he's happened to meet Mrs. Worrall, in that case——" she paused.

He nodded and chuckled joyously.

"Yes! Yes! I sent her flying. Bounced in to come the parson over me and quote Peter. I gave her her head. Let her chuck the lot off her chest—a sour lot, too, to be sure. Then *I* began. Sketched a vicar's wife as she is and as she ought to be. Courteously, meekly, I hope, as a sinful man may, you understand, in the presence of an avenging angel."

Here Jasper shrewdly paused to gather his scattering wits.

"Your language, she said, was awful," observed Joan unmoved.

"Scripture! my girl, scripture! Every damned word of it; I beg your pardon! I do assure you though 'twas scripture. A man with a spur in him can put a lot of action into scripture." He dreamily tapped his glass. "She was obviously impressed."

"She was," said Joan.

In the pause Mr. Winnington poured out some more whiskey.

"Why did you begin this time?" enquired Joan, her grave, attentive eyes upon the bottle. "There seems to be no apparent cause."

There was a long silence broken only by a contented sound of soft sipping.

"Conscience," said Jasper at last, and relapsed into silence.

"Yes?" said Joan.

Fine moon when I started last night, set me off thinking no doubt. Look here, my girl, Rebecca's got on my mind. She's on me, poor soul, like a thousand bricks. I can't throw her off. And if I could I'm dashed if it would be playing the straight game to do it. Damn it all—confound my infernal tongue. Oh, well! you know, we were engaged once. I was immensely fond of Rebecca. Magnificent girl! Never saw such eyes—and a figure. It's no good," he muttered sadly, "you'd never believe me—be putting it down to whiskey. Oh, well, never mind. She rode like a bird. Could turn a figure of eight with a four-in-hand on a crown piece, so to speak. Kind and true as an angel, poor Rebecca! And as straight through and through as they make 'em! There was mischief made—and I married poor Isabella!" He lowered voice and eyes apologetically.

"Love takes hold of women in different ways," he resumed more robustly. "Some can shake it off while you say 'knife' and start on something else—as likely as not—marriage. In some it turns sour and is let off in poisonous gossip or parochial ferretting; some throw it off on pugs or a macaw. It gets into the religion of more and peters

out in good works, or curtain lectures. But in some women it stays and turns 'em into a temple within, without——”

He paused. “Without—God help us all, sometimes time and the weather get the upper hand. I had a shock last night, my girl—the devil’s own shock!”

Rebecca’s weird form overflowing the tremulous stool arose before Joan’s reflective eyes. One gleam of sympathy escaped and flew to Jasper, but her heart bled for Rebecca.

“The one single thing that would set everything right,” said she at last, with a square look at the whiskey, “would be for you to marry Rebecca.”

His eyes followed hers and dropped.

“I know it. Damn it all, don’t I know it? Forgive me. But isn’t it this that——”

“Don’t you think that some of it is natural depravity?”

Her voice was extraordinarily sweet and unassuming.

“Now that’s just where you go wrong,” said Jasper hotly. “Natural depravity forsooth! It’s a spur to a jaded horse. A leg up to a drooping conscience! The bridge between despair and hope.”

“Oh!” murmured Joan in unruffled innocence.

“Ahem!” resumed Jasper, “a silver lining that can be fitted to any cloud. A means, my child, towards divers excellent ends. That’s, of course, when it robs a man’s wits of nothing save only the mawkishness of over-civilisation, and has never left him,” said the squire, smiling magnificently; “never in the whole course of a long life with a next morning’s head on him, or made him do justice upon anyone who didn’t richly deserve it. I defy you to say it has, my girl.”

“Go on,” said Joan. “Have I said one word?”

“To give you your due you haven’t, nor looked one either.”

“Yet conscience——”

“Hang conscience! I’m telling you facts. Good malt and barley have helped me up many a steep hill; been a trusty staff in my hand through many a tough job, and I’m thankful for them.”

Joan dreamily watched him.

"It's quite likely your head won't ache to-morrow," said she. "You're surprisingly strong, but I wonder if you'll still be thankful."

"I hope I may, and if I'm not," said Jasper, with pious vehemence, "may God forgive me."

Joan looked confused, but enquiring.

"Rebecca Westcar's something to be thankful for, I tell you. A mine of pure gold. The best of her kind! But God pity the weakness of man. Sometimes he'll want a leg-up before he can attain," he murmured pathetically. "Before he can, so to speak, shift his balances, and put the right thing through."

He leaned, lost in thought, upon his great stick, then lifted a hot, resolute face.

"One spur and it's done! And there you are slick into a new life!

"Rebecca, my girl," he rapped out jerkily, "is a woman of great determination and—propinquity does much. You can't be hurting a woman's prejudices when she's sitting cheek by jowl with you by your own fire-side. That is," he hastily added, "if she's straight and fair upon her part and don't nag."

"It's a very curious sort of morality," said Joan. "I don't understand it, but I daresay it has its points. If you were married to Rebecca Jasper minor might often go to stay with you."

This was a sore subject; Jasper promptly bristled.

"He could come now, as I've told you a thousand times."

"How could he possibly? We all want his life to be as sweet and open as the day. Nothing to gloss over in it or get hot over, or feel afraid about. Think of Jasper having to know—about horrid things—to have fairly to hate people because they know—and have the most odious ways of using their knowledge."

"I'll marry Rebecca before the year's out," said the convicted sinner in a hollow voice.

"You'll never marry her at all if it's only just as a sheep dog you want her," said Joan. "Rebecca is a proud woman. She wants love and loyalty and courage and sensible behaviour generally. Not to be the last refuge of a coward."

Stung to a fleeting sobriety of limb Jasper stumbled to his feet, his eyes blazing redly.

"Coward! Sheep dog!" he roared. "We'll have the baby on the stump next! A chit of a child, all love and no experience, who doesn't know what enjoying herself means, to preach to me!"

"You know I couldn't preach to save my life."

"Humph!" He dropped back into his chair.

"Besides I do know what enjoying myself means. I even understand a great deal about enjoyments I've never had myself in all my life." Joan caught her breath in an odd way and clasped her hands. "I can understand the delight of dancing and of betting and gambling," said she, with controlled excitement. "If I read of a race in the papers it follows me. I can see the horses, and the people, and the post; I can hear the shouts, and feel just what they're all feeling—I know I can. I know just what's going on in them. I can see the actors in all the plays. Directly I've got the plot, the idea—I can act every character myself. I have the most extraordinary understanding of—of unworthy pursuits." She paused, her bright impartial eyes moving from Jasper to the decanters. "I believe I could understand even drinking if I let myself, more especially when it doesn't leave a headache behind it, much less sorrow or shame."

She sighed softly as she added under her breath, "It's the higher enjoyments that seem difficult really to enter into."

Jasper was one dismayed stare. "What's theory after all?" at last he stuttered.

"It's late," she said, slowly pinning on her hat.

"Skirmishing with temptations you haven't the faintest hope of being called upon to resist, must indeed be dull work," he ejaculated.

"I have sometimes wondered if a real big mountain of a temptation rose up before one," Joan said, beginning to put on her gloves. "If the very thought of the size of the fight wouldn't give you courage to get through it well. The very fact of confounding your enemies by your victory, you know, and forcing them into eating their words would be such a help, don't you think?"

"Damn—I say, my girl, not going?"

"I must, or luncheon will be cold. A delicious luncheon," she added pensively. "Your two ducks, and the cream cheese."

Her look and all it implied was hardly within Jasper's grasp, but it moved him in a confused sort of way.

"What do you want of me then in God's name?"

"Under present circumstances, nothing."

As she firmly intended it should do, this set Jasper raging.

"Do you suppose then that I'm imbecile?—A swinish log?" he roared. "A confounded boa-constrictor, like Jenks, the pedlar—the traditional village sot?"

"It's so difficult to determine exactly. What's theory after all?" said Joan, smiling upon him like an angel. His wrath exploded in a hoarse laugh.

"To prove just how drunk you really are, will you," she said pleasantly, "will you see if you can go upstairs, have a bath, and dress yourself properly?"

Jasper started, grunted, and stared.

"If you're equal to that, and to come down again—without Higgins in advance of you to break the fall—and eat your luncheon——" Joan paused to get her voice quiet, and in the pause she whitened. "If you can do all that I'll send Jasper minor up after his dinner, and you can take him for a drive."

"You'll do that?"

"I will. I promise."

For a long time he was silent, watching her face.

"It's a bargain, girl. I'll bring him safe back to you. And you might send Higgins to me. And, you can't help being a woman my girl, you'd feel better if you had the keys."

"But Higgins would feel awful and so would you. You'll come to dine with us to-night?"

Her voice seemed to be going away from her altogether. She had to drop her frightened eyes. She turned dully to go to the door, but used to self-discipline, turned again before she got there to fling back a wan little ghost-like smile that went like a dart to Jasper's heart. Confused, convicted, torn with remorse, he was about to give her back her magnanimous offer. But she was gone. He could hear her light steps flying down the path. His legs

were not yet in a condition to follow her, but his sobered brain saw as clear as day that the white-faced little girl had just done a very big thing for his sinful sake.

CHAPTER XX.

As Joan ran up the garden she perceived Mrs. Worrall—her best satin stretched solemnly across a creaking bosom, her hat well eased off her large flat face—seated squarely in the window, obviously prepared for luncheon.

"She's beaten me!" gasped Joan, her hand upon the latch. "And—Oh! I wonder how it strikes George?"

Plainly, from the lower point of view, it had not struck George at all!

He was listening with courteous attention to the lady's out-pourings—wondering indeed how it struck the amiable and long-suffering Peter.

Joan found him out at a glance.

"He's pitying Peter," she thought plaintively, "he hasn't even noticed the hat," which indeed was less than fair to George, who felt sorry for Peter upon this account also.

Once again Joan searched her husband's face. One smallest glance of sympathetic understanding would have greatly cheered and fortified her.

The answering smile of George was incomparable of its kind, but not just what she wanted. She felt suddenly clerical, set apart, and guilty. Her wistful eyes flew to Heron, cool and imperturbable, leaning up against the window frame.

His comprehending grin supplied all that George's smile left lacking.

Feeling young again, and unofficial, Joan advanced courageously to the victorious enemy.

"Mr. Winnington," sweetly explained the lady, "insisted on my coming in to luncheon, and has been discussing so many things with me here, although I begged him not to consider me, knowing how anxious he must be to get to the Hall."

In order to match George, Joan had had a really nice

sentence, with a touch of penitence in it, on the tip of her tongue; but she altered her intention.

"How kind of you! But it's no use going to the Hall, George," she said, turning to him, "your father will be out. If you want a message taken, nurse is just going up with Jasper; his grandfather wants to take him for a drive."

George started, but, warned by a look of eager entreaty from his wife, discreetly held his tongue.

"Won't you come and take off your hat, Mrs. Worrall?" said Joan.

Rob Heron noticed with carnal joy that the face of the Vicar's lady, as she followed her hostess's proud young back, was unevenly suffused with pain.

He was still in the window, supposing that George had left the room, when the sound of flying feet and a quick cry of "George! George!" made him turn to see the parson and his wife face to face just within the door.

He felt uncomfortable, but decided to cough should anything happen.

"Joan!" cried George. "How is this? the account she gave——"

"George! If you could feel for one single moment as I do about that woman, Oh! what an unutterable comfort it would be! She told me in her horrible way and so, of course, I went up at once and found that he was going to be simply awful this time. But I think I was in time. George, I've given him Jasper for the whole afternoon. He didn't ask. I gave him myself. Oh, George! Oh, George!"

"My child! My brave little girl! God——"

"Don't—oh, don't talk of God! I can only think of baby and your father. It's he, after all, who will have to drive. Oh! don't look like that, I can't help it. I feel distracted. And—I may just as well tell you—I didn't ask her to luncheon. I was firmly determined not to, and I hate being conquered. Oh! You may as well know. I don't feel right, I'm so terrified about that drive. She's a horror, and the luncheon is so nice. I shouldn't mind half so much if it was a cheese-day."

George dumbly stared.

"But at least I did right about Baby, George! say that I did."

"I am sure you did right, dearest."

She looked breathlessly in his face.

"Oh! If only I could believe in your father's driving in his present state as firmly as you do in God's care! But—he was very bad—and enjoying himself so immensely. George! If you look nothing but—but—holy—when she comes down she'll know things are quite as bad as she hopes they are, and that giving him Jasper is nothing else but a miserable gamble!"

From the first day he had seen Joan, Heron had been oddly attracted by the quick changes going on in her. Now torn with the pain of a great sacrifice of self just made, the adoration and recoil in her attitude to her husband, her docility and revolt, her high womanliness and somewhat feline joy in pleasure and soft living, all the sorting and resorting, the sure unevenness of a character in the making, the things, in short, that confused and startled George, passed before Heron as in a looking-glass.

George, with a tender, puzzled, inquiring surprise, looked into his wife's face.

Heron felt that this was the only woman, save his mother, whom he had ever intimately known.

"George," she cried, "he's been doing justice on every one since daylight—full of—and his face and the row of decanters—nothing could possibly have stopped him, but something—huge. That's why I did it, dear."

Rob knew by George's back—now turned to him—that he was looking a dozen things into his wife's face. He wondered with grim, irrational irritation, if, by any chance, they were the right things.

The dull thud of a descending body on the stairs smote upon his ears, and Joan's voice was saying quietly: "I hope luncheon won't be cold so that you may all be able to forgive me for my lateness without any particular effort, you know."

"I say! you want to make a luxury of forgiveness on both sides," said George, with a laugh. "I doubt if it's sound doctrine."

"I hope it is," said Heron. "Anyway it's an uncommonly pleasant way of looking at a very poisonous business. If you feel you're conferring a boon as well as accepting a favour you need never bother to grovel before your forgiver."

"But in any case there are compensations," said George. "You can always console yourself by considering the tortures the other fellow's endured in getting up the steam to forgive."

"Dear Mr. Winnington," bleated Mrs. Worrall from her duck, "as though you couldn't forgive any enemy."

"But anyone could forgive an enemy. You expect nothing particular from an enemy, you can easily excuse him."

"Even a friend," she coldly ventured, "may upon occasion call for some forgiveness."

"Forgiveness is not the word between friends, is it? You have nothing to go upon with your friends but experience, and experience is rather a broken reed. We're constantly astonishing ourselves, of whom we know every turn and twist, so how can we expect not occasionally to be unpleasantly surprised by our friends, of whose twistings we can only guess? It's a question of accepting, not forgiving. It's only when forgiving or being forgiven lies between two so close and intimate that the very fact of its need means shuffling the whole scheme of your existence, the smashing up of a lot of idols, a regular shock to the foundations of things generally that forgiveness comes in, and then it calls for real hard condition. Heron, have some tomatoes?"

"They're Miss Rebecca's, and rather famous," said Joan, hurrying back to her duty. George's brows suddenly jerking together had fascinated and frightened her into momentary forgetfulness.

"He could forgive any one," she thought, nervously, "but me or himself, and he finds—it's simply dreadful having to forgive his father."

"For my part," commented Mrs. Worrall, "I find that a Parish calls out all one's power of forgiving."

"A parish! Oh! you mean having to swear at sinners—that sort of thing. But, after all, language has nothing

to do with forgiving or condemning. It's—it's a department in itself."

"Then who's to judge of anything?" she wailed. "You rob us of all our rights."

"The opinion of the majority is a fair test of common conduct for common men," said George good-humouredly. "And there's always the Court of Final Appeal, into whose counsels even the Archbishops haven't, so far, been invited—even as witnesses."

"This really is very interesting. I do wish Peter were here," cried Mrs. Worrall. "The opinion of one forced from poetry into prose while yet in early manhood—Peter, Mr. Winnington, has in his time, written a book of verse, religious of course; indeed the gift is in his family—a cousin—although he had quite eight hundred a year and really nice connections, to the day of his death sent verses to the various periodicals—but as I was saying, the experience"—she paused, to gather up her threads—"of a man forced from pleasant dallying with the Muses into the hideous hand-to-hand conflict with sin, must surely be of some little value. And yet——" she coughed behind the vast bony structure of her hand, "—and yet there are things that crop up in one's sad daily rounds for which even Peter can find no forgiveness."

When she spoke earnestly and with speed, Mrs. Worrall spat in a general sort of way; of this unpleasant fact George was painfully aware, but he answered like a Christian:

"Consciences vary quite as much as constitutions, don't you think? It's one of the things, I always think, that makes ordinary forgiveness pretty easy."

"Mrs. Worrall," cried Joan, "do have one of Miss Rebecca's peaches."

Mrs. Worrall was knotting her handkerchief under the table-cloth to remind Peter to bring the subject of forgiving at random under the notice of the next clerical meeting, and so confound the presumption of ignorance.

The peach somehow increased her natural irritation; it reminded her of the gilded youth of George Winnington—a glance at the home-made blouse worn by George's wife, gave Mrs. Worrall pause—gilded, anyway, a vast deal more than ever dear Peter's was, she amended, as she carefully peeled her peach.

A sudden conviction that the silver she had long deemed to be the best Sheffield, was after all solid, increased her godly wrath.

"And we the descendants of humble fishermen," she sorrowfully reflected, "who drank probably out of cockle-shells."

"Don't be persuading Mr. Winnington to deal with us according to our transgressions," entreated Captain Heron. "If he begins at that game, where would any of us be? I should be sitting, any way, on some weird stool of repentance, remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow, instead of advising you strongly to eat this nectarine."

Mrs. Worrall simpered, and threw back a limp strayed lock.

"Pray don't suppose, Captain Heron, that I don't admire Mr. Winnington's beautiful sense of charity. But will it wear? I ask."

"It won't wear us out at least. There are some things connected with the Church that you'll admit do, rather, eh? Mrs. Worrall," said he, still plying her with fruit. He seized the moment for his impertinence while George was conferring with his wife in regard to the temporal estate of one Jonathan Jones, who concerneth not this chronicle.

Mrs. Worrall bridled and smiled. She could always get on with a polite young man, and in a chaste way enjoyed conversation with him.

"Ah! Captain Heron," she sighed, "one often sees allusions in the daily Press to the grievances of the Army. We also have ours. Young men of doubtful antecedents, who come in amongst us through colleges of a low order"—it was a sense of haste and responsibility, not spiritual and ecclesiastical pride, that caused her here to "spit" dreadfully and greatly distress Joan—"taken from St. Bees, you know, and St. Asaph's and the like. They, I admit with sorrow, do frequently bring the Word into disrepute and prove a snare to refined intelligences, used to the ministrations of those of enlightened views and County connections. Failing that," she murmured modestly, "with relatives in the higher Professions."

"It must make an immense difference," said Heron, with vague though warm sympathy.

"It makes *all* the difference, Captain Heron."

But though, like St. Paul, always ready at the convenient season to expand in social intercourse and be all things to all men, she yet remembered the hall-marked silver, and that she had a testimony to make. She drew from her beaded bosom a watch that raucously ticked.

"Two-thirty! Dear me! Labourers in any vineyard must not be idle," said the indefatigable lady, plunging back upon her diocesan position. "Mrs. Winnington, pray don't let me detain your husband."

She lifted her eyes in a large piercing glance at Joan's pretty table, and strangled a sigh.

"In our sin-laden, laborious, almost sordidly frugal life, one does sometimes feel a little envious of those whose lines are set in pleasant places. But there is one thing to be said—in the very heart of sin and misery one is at least preserved from any temptation to entrench one's self in the lap of luxury. The contrast is too awful. One couldn't bear it."

"One gets roses in the country for nothing," said Joan, in a distinct voice, "and the other——"

But George had seen her eyes. They struck him as being superb—with professional points—still. He jumped up alertly.

"You're quite right, Mrs. Worrall. I must be going."

"Mr. Winnington—one moment—I must see you—" she hesitated, and modestly coughed behind her hand, "in the hall—if you don't mind."

Joan and Rob discreetly drew back.

"What's up now?" enquired the young man.

"Some abominable suspicion, I should think quite unfit for publication. Talk of something else."

"She's so engrossing. Are there many of her? Is she herself or a chip of a type?"

"Herself, Captain Heron," said Joan, precipitately. "I want you distinctly to know that this luncheon is an exception. Most of it was sent to us by Miss Rebecca and George's father, so as not to disgrace the family before you. If we'd been alone the sick would have had the best part of it, we'd have had just what wouldn't agree with them. And to think of her daring to suggest that George—George pampers himself!"

"But—but don't you like that sort of thing—food and things?" he demanded, stammering.

"I? Of course I do. But—but—you don't suppose I'd like George to be beaten by Peter? I'm truly sorry for—Peter, but if you saw him——"

"I understand—I've seen his wife."

"That—in the Church, at any rate—that's not final," said Joan thoughtfully.

"But it's a clue."

Absorbed in certain chaotic reflections of her own, to this Joan made no reply; so Rob turned his thoughts upon the consideration of "a dinner of herbs," where love is. "But somehow Love doesn't seem to flavour them," he thought; "now how's that, I wonder?"

Possibly Mrs. Worrall in the hall might have told him. She was then deep in the fatal subject.

"Oh! Mr. Winnington," she wailed, "don't talk to me of love. The very name of it is the bane of a conscientious clergyman. And twilight, I assure you, fills one with absolute nausea! The sight of a couple in a lane makes me shudder. The trail of sin spoils scenery! A girl may be as steady and biddable as you could wish, never missing a sewing meeting, putting her pennies every week in the bank, wearing decorous hats and mended stockings. Love—" she paused to snort—"LOVE sets in—she begins to *walk*—where are you? Unless you see to it, there will be trouble. I met Anne Dale on Monday, a yellow bunch of daffodils on her head, a pink tie about her neck, and with her James Black! Dropping with fatigue though I was, I took the trouble to follow the pair down Stepings lane—knee-deep, I assure you, in mud. James Black was—I have it on *undoubted* authority—drunk at Wisley fair——"

"I'm glad I can contradict that upon even better authority, Mrs. Worrall—my own, in fact—" said George, "I was there. So don't, pray, add it to your own anxieties. You'll be glad to know, too, for a fact, that the banns are to be put up next Sunday."

"What are Banns against human depravity?"

"Oh! come, now! They're an earnest, anyhow, of honest intentions."

"H'm, yes! Far be it from me, Mr. Winnington, to

press my services where they are not welcome. Your parish is your own."

"They're both rather friends of mine, you know, both Anne and James," said George, with unruffled good humour.

"Yes. But, dear Mr. Winnington, with your capacity for charity——"

"My friendship doesn't count for much. But in regard to those two young people, we can at least hope."

"Ah! yes. We can hope. Good-bye, Mrs. Winnington." She moved nearer to Joan and lowered her voice. "I think I can feel what you are feeling about your little boy, with his poor grandfather in that state."

"Oh!" said Joan, in dulcet tones, hoping to goodness that George wouldn't hear her. "I'm not the least anxious. Mr. Winnington is a perfect whip. He couldn't possibly make a mistake."

Mrs. Worrall looked at her, and softly sighed.

CHAPTER XXI.

DRIVEN by promptings compounded in equal parts of satanic pride and saintly repentance, by a pursuing, haunting need for speed—for the ring of rushing hoofs, the balm of keen cloven air, with a gnawing torment at the pit of his stomach, and a megrim in his brain, Jasper—beside him the nurse quaking and grinning, with Jasper minor on her knee—drove with magnificent audacity round every perilous corner in the parish. But he brought the child safe home to his mother.

Subsequently he dined decorously, but with little appetite, under the maddening benignity of George's eye. It was a ruthless dinner that, and sent the sinning father groaning to a restless bed. He arose from it dejected, but buoyed up still by a consuming sense of virtue implacably urging him to increased effort. Once started upon the bitter road to repentance the Squire was resolved to

tread it so firmly, and so relentlessly, as thoroughly to satisfy all those so embarrassingly concerned in his higher interests.

But in spite of all his woes, the tender sacrifice just offered up for the sake of his sinful old soul oddly uplifted Jasper, and filled him with a whimsical reverent passion for his little daughter-in-law.

The Squire's reserve of emotion was in its way as vast as the rest of him and naturally enough the inevitable overflow drained off into the half-choked, deep, old channels cut long ago by his first love.

From Joan, defying time and weather, he climbed somewhat heavily to Rebecca.

"I'll go to-day," he said aloud, when having paused momentarily beside a groaning side-board which the night before—in order to test his courage—he had directed to be set out bravely with glittering temptation, he proudly passed on.

Having tried for a good half hour to concentrate his thoughts upon Æschylus, an author who entered largely into his seasons of repentance, as a whip to effort he forsook the seclusion of the library and betook himself to a less strenuous retreat.

He turned, in fact, into the gun-room, in the intervals of his reflections upon love and its embarrassments, to experiment with a new short-range rifle from the window.

He had previously warned the stable lads that if they were idiots enough to bring their doddering carcasses within shot range of experimental practice it was their look-out not his.

"I wonder," he paused to reflect after some dozen shots, "if the little girl would lend me the child for an hour or so. One wants a peculiar leg-up in a delicate business of this nature.

"John Higgins," he called out, "tell Black to have the dog-cart at the door at ten o'clock."

Sighing, he regulated the sight of his rifle. The amazing steadiness of his hand cheered him.

Having avoided by a hair's breadth the red head of a quivering mass of horror creeping stealthily towards the harness room, his courage mounted higher.

"I'll stroll down to the Vicarage myself, John, after all,

and see if the little chap would like a drive," he said presently, looking into the dining-room.

As the Squire paused on the hill above the Church he experienced a shock of an unprecedented and startling order.

Just below him Joan and a young man, with an exceptionally neat swagger, were advancing with rather a marked air of leisure, their laughter rising light upon the breeze.

"The very set of her shoulders is yielding to these new and insidious conditions," he reflected, with a pained but interested stare. "And the elder man, too, the fellow with the story! By Jove! Hoped it was the innocuous young shaver she's being a mother to; but no such luck! And with George climbing everlasting hills for all he's worth, when he's not sunk in drains."

Joan's eyes were sparkling amazingly. She laughed with delicious merriment. She didn't see him, not she! an infernal deal too absorbed for that.

"Well, my dear, out for a stroll?" said Jasper.

The artful words stung the Vicar's helpmate back to the Parish; her dormant activities arose. "I set out meaning just to carry round broth, and somehow we've got here," she explained.

"It's only another way round," suggested Heron coolly.

"Yes, but rather a long one," said Joan, "and Mrs. Penn expects her beef-tea at eleven o'clock to the minute."

"Ah! They keep you in order."

"Little you know, it's my little daughter-in-law who keeps us all in order," said the Squire with ready wit, his keen eye upon Heron and the Future. "The most inexorable stickler for *noblesse oblige* you ever came across. Never lets one of us off."

"One for that young man used to slack fashionables," Jasper proudly told himself. "If George's unfortunate proclivities have converted her into a parochial drudge, better assume once for all that she's the royal variety, born in the purple—one, so to speak, by divine right, not by reason of the vagaries of a fellow who ought to know better. Takes the sting out of the dispensation somehow to assume that she enjoys it. Can't have my daughter-in-law lumped with the ordinary parson's spouse."

"Well played that," thought Heron, glancing with frank admiration at the fine old figure.

"I'm on my way to see Rebecca upon some rather important business," resumed Jasper, carefully prising up a dock.

Joan looked warm approbation, but suggested that it was rather early.

"Never deferred any business till the afternoon but I had cause to regret it," said Jasper valiantly.

"Far be it from me to be a spoke in the wheel of duty," said Heron. "I have promptings of duty myself on stock though seldom asked for. You've aroused them, Mr. Winnington, and I'm off to repair some of Fred's omissions. Better try your hand on him next, Squire."

"By the way," said Jasper hastily, with a longing look at the light young man, "I'd like to stroll round myself and take a look at the horses."

"Only too delighted, sir. But——" Illuminated by a vague though stirring suspicion, Captain Heron halted deliberately to look with modest deprecation from Mrs. George to the old man.

Joan's eyes were full of laughter, but her lips were firm. She glanced calmly at a tree-top. Jasper flushed lustily.

"Are you going to see the horses now?" she innocently inquired.

"This," thought Jasper with precipitation, "this is scarce fair to Rebecca. A queen amongst women, poor Rebecca! Worlds too good for the like of me."

"Well, my dear, I think not. Suppose, Heron, we say to-morrow? Our ways, my girl, lie together for a bit."

Heron went off chuckling. The bye-play of eyes tickled him immensely, and he was never a marplot in any pretty game.

"I've forfeited a pleasant morning," he thought ruefully. "And I wonder what she's after, and if it will console her for the wiles of a sinful leisure on a summer's day. Poor child, this to be accounted unto her for unrighteousness! What a household!"

He turned to watch the ascending pair.

"If her clothes fitted, her back is the back of the little mother. And her walk—she makes music wherever she goes as *she* used to do. Only so far the music this one

makes is in the minor key. She could dance to a merrier measure. Some day I'll see if I can't set her going."

But whilst he watched and compared, the other woman—his mother was back in her bewildering, mocking, maddening way, playing bo-peep again in all his thoughts.

In spite of everything his mother was always welcome and in the company of the wife of a *bonâ-fide* saint, herself compact of faith and ignorance, although the companionship in no sort of way commended itself to his reason, it yet touched his sense of humour, fixed his interest, and was any way an informing partnership, full of nebulous possibilities.

He turned promptly to the vexed question of hock sprains, but the quaint fellowship seemed still to pursue him with whimsical illusory suggestions. At last little Mrs. George grew as disturbing, absorbing, and unsettling as his little mother, and so exasperated did he become with both that he wrote a hasty note excusing himself from luncheon, and buried himself in the wholesome safety of horses.

"Why can't women stick to the primitive type and leave you alone?" he demanded, addressing a snaffle. "They fall on their feet—do primitive types, and are not incommoded by conditions. To suggest either tragedy or comedy or both would be as bad as indecent exposure to their simple minds. The husband of a primitive type might live in a villa and produce a large family, yet really enjoy himself. The others are fire-flies in your brain. And yet—and yet you can't get rid of them—and you don't want to. I'm afraid that girl is only surface meek, and I wonder if she's good or only trying to be good. This sort of thing gets infernally oppressive, however, and I thinking too that I'd done with women!"

"Now," mused Jasper, upon his part, "that danger averted, I'm in, neck and crop for the other."

"Joan, my girl," he wheedled, "it's a grand morning. Suppose I run the young chap over to Rebecca's."

Joan's face primmed. "To-day? But surely he'd be dreadfully in the way?"

"On the contrary I'm inclined to believe he'd be a most timely relief. You must approach these matters—by suggestion—gradually, you know."

"But hasn't all that part been faithfully gone through?"

Every detail attached to Jasper minor has rather a way of distracting you from—from active operations, you know."

"The presence of a child," pleaded the modest lover, "is often of immense assistance in the most onerous affairs."

"But it's rather aggressive, don't you think? and all-pervading? In some circumstances a woman might herself like to be the centre of attraction. You can have him to-morrow for the whole day—if things go off all right."

Jasper had learnt before this that his daughter-in-law was a somewhat difficult person with whom to argue, and being, in spite of his bad habits, of a philosophical turn, he shrugged his shoulders with melancholy resignation.

"Women take these things with an amazing calm," sighed he. "The fact of their ideals being so frequently iced keeps 'em, no doubt, cool. It is given to them, moreover, to see many things as through a glass darkly. Any way they are dauntless creatures. You must, however, remember, in justice to us, that *you* are spared the brunt of the business, the first plunge into dark waters."

"But there's always some one on the spot to fish you out," suggested Joan soothingly.

"Well, yes—but even then——" He thoughtfully flicked the crest off a thistle.

"You would prefer, perhaps, not to be fished out?" she enquired artlessly, "to be left floundering?"

"I haven't the least notion what I'd prefer," he rejoined wrathfully, then broke all at once into a thunderous laugh. "And you think I'm the first man in the same hobble—eh? Little you know. Little any woman knows. Fools rush in—Jove! That's getting a bit personal. Now, for God's sake, don't look like that or how is a man to explain himself intelligibly to a woman's point of view? All very well for you, flippant with youth and sentiment, or for me—over night. But Rebecca is a big fence to take for any man past his prime and handicapped with gout and—and other things, and with all the sentiment of him sifted in the sieve of experience. I love and honour every bone in Rebecca Westcar's body—deuce take me if I don't. I know the value of her heart, the soundness of her fine, acute intelligence. I have every advantage to

myself in—in this—ahem!—transaction at my finger ends, yet I'd give half I possess to anyone who'd put it through for me. Break me, so to speak, to poor Rebecca. It struck me," he faltered, "that the baby might be instrumental in bringing us together, you know, without any unnecessary jolting."

"I'm afraid," said Joan inexorably, "you'll never slide into Cousin Rebecca, and it's rather exacting of you to expect it after all these years. However you manage it surely it must come with a bump."

"Yes, yes! But can't you see? A man upon an occasion like this wants to get the years off his mind—the years that the locusts have eaten—and his gout—and the thousand and one things frayed and devoured by time and one's own folly. The pleasant things one has dropped by the way. It's impossible to explain to you," he pursued hotly. "But this thing wants courage. The tail-end of an exceptionally—ahem—human life is a queer enough article at any time to throw on the market. A man don't like being the butt of his own humour—or of that of any shrewd woman ripe with wit and virtue. To go wooing with the twelfth Chapter of Ecclesiastes singing in your ears makes you diffident, my girl, I'd have you to know. In short I'm in the devil of a blue funk, my dear, and I thought your baby might have brought back a little of the dew to the parched earth for both Rebecca and me."

"I'm afraid," said Joan, now melting with sympathetic understanding, "I'm afraid he'd only fill the room with himself and upset everything."

"Ah! well, I must face it alone. 'Because man goeth to his long home and the mourners go about the streets.' Wish that infernal fine poem wouldn't keep tormenting me. Read it last night till I saw stars."

"It's hardly appropriate to the occasion," suggested Joan. "There are others. 'The Song of Solomon,' for instance, and a host of prophets and patriarchs, all marrying men. And I haven't noticed that in your case 'Those that look out of the windows' are darkened——"

"God bless my soul! Never wore glasses in my life!"

"Then you ought to be able to see clear enough to look back through all the years and see things as they used to be. I believe then they'd keep so, and you'd both

forget that any years had ever come between—anything. You and Cousin Rebecca between you ought to have sense and sight enough to throw bridges over the years and take trips together into the old times. It must be dull to have to go alone and sad and silent; but two together! It would alter everything!”

“Ha! child. You have a way with you! I’ll go while the spur is in me! Just catch her before luncheon.”

“And I’m a good hour late, and won’t catch anyone,” cried Joan, hurrying discreetly away.

“It’s her drug morning,” she thought, with a regretful start. “I do hope to goodness her fingers won’t smell of senna. And I wonder if the sun-bonnet will look more awful than usual, or less, from not having been seen lately.”

With an inexpressible sensation of faint, sick, physical repulsion Joan paused the next minute upon a threshold redolent of respectable but unwashed old age, took a deep breath, and went in as bright and noiseless as a sun-beam, to be soundly rated for her inexcusable negligence in bringing the broth late.

The bonnet, as it happened, looked *more* awful, and was Jasper’s first shock at it dangled askew on Rebecca’s neck, whilst she rested upon a bench by the Dispensary.

But he overcame manfully his mental shudder and solemnly marched forward.

“My dear Jasper,” she called out, “you look as though you were about to charge a Jury. Is it gout? Or have you been up to anything more disreputable than usual?”

“The sun’s in your eyes, Rebecca. Never felt better in my life. Come down the garden walk.”

“I was thinking of going round to the pig-styes. That old doddering Jones is jawing about measles. Now you’re here you might——”

“Confound the pigs! Too fine a morning to waste on pigs.”

“Might waste finer on worse things,” she remarked in an observant pause. “However, since you’re set on the garden walk, of all places in the world, come then.”

“What is up with the man?” she reflected, frowning. “Look’s distinctly peculiar.”

In face of his continued silence she was seized with real urgent anxiety.

"Whatever it is, Jasper, speak up." She planked herself down on a seat under the outspread tail of a peacock cut in yew, and spread her fingers on her knees. "I won't take another step until I hear everything. Don't hesitate man, I'm always prepared for anything with you. Pray don't consider my feelings, but suspense I won't stand at any price. What is it this time?"

"My dear friend," she rapped out irritably, as he hesitated, "anyone would think we'd only met yesterday."

"The truth is, Rebecca, I come upon a widely different errand from any you suggest." Upon the spur of a long buried instinct Jasper threw a leg. "You certainly give one little assistance."

"In the name of common sense how can I assist you till I know what you're after?"

A horrid suggestion of bristling entered like the devil into the moustache. Jasper's eyes were only too quick to perceive it, but his heart ached when he thought of the goodness of Rebecca; her faith; her love; her unswerving patience and loyalty.

His eyes, full of kindness, and an odd wistful, half-amused remorse, rested upon her ravaged face.

"I want more than you bargain for, Rebecca. I want *you*."

"You want me? And what for, pray?"

Jasper lifted a proud, offended head.

She stared and whistled.

"And who sent you, may I enquire, upon this astounding errand? Joan Winnington?"

"Rebecca! This is no light matter."

"Obviously not; you look thoroughly worn out. Oh—sit down, Jasper, do! Standing is most trying for a man of your size, and it fidgets me to see you towering up in that bird's tail. And so you want me, do you?" she said, in a voice all at once grown tired. "And you thought you'd better make known your wants whilst yet there was time—make hay before the sun went under, in short." She threw up her head sharply, and had time to remember it when last he had asked her, a fleecy cloud of blackness. And so for a minute she said no more.

The plethora of subtle emotions in the occasion touched Jasper keenly. He would have spoken bravely out in fair, flowing words, but a queer affectionate respect withheld him. There were things going on in and about them too deep for such words as would come to him. They could only hurt and outrage both himself and Rebecca. The sheer inherent sincerity of Jasper struck him dumb.

What he had to offer he knew, in a flash, to be unworthy of Rebecca, unworthy of himself.

The pigs that not ten minutes ago had painfully jarred upon him, now flooded his soul with a longing. He looked queerly toward the farm-yard path. But his honour was now engaged, there was no drawing back.

Jasper experienced the most fiendishly uncomfortable moment of a long and chequered life. He paled visibly. His hands tightened convulsively upon his stick. He floundered in the bitter waters of humility. To go forward was the one thing left him, but a man must get his breath.

Save in theory, or when the victim has died beautifully in a well-preserved youth, there is something awful to a man in the life-long, unbroken, unepisodal love of a woman for himself whom fate has forbidden to share and enjoy it. To be brought sharp up against it in the flesh, howsoever expectant and prepared for the encounter, will make the stoutest quail.

Rebecca hitched herself round to look at Jasper. And as she gazed she remembered his last abortive attempt and the naïve exhortations of Joan that probably heralded in this, and in spite of a rending heart she widely smiled.

"Poor Jasper can't get out his fine prepared speech," she thought. "It sticks in his honest throat. And no doubt I do look weird, splashed out against that abominable bird's tail. Ah! well. The last little stroll home together might have been very sweet!—My dear Jasper," she remarked, with monumental serenity, "this has been one of the things to be done, and to be done well. You've got through it admirably. But suppose we take the rest as read and be just the tried and trusty friends that we have always been. In that connection neither has ever failed the other or ever could. It's proven ground, old friend.

We're a bit hoary and stiff, you and I, to go breaking up new country."

She paused to look at him, smiling even wider than before.

"It would—it would be like planting flowers on a grave," she said, "and that thought would spoil the scent of them for me. We'll stick to the well-matured herbs that have grown up about our feet. They're pungent any way, and wholesome, and have served us well. They have flavoured life for us. Come, Jasper," she said slowly, moving as though to rise, "we'll drink to our sturdy old friendship in a glass of my best port."

"Rebecca!" he cried, with genuine feeling. "Don't go, my dear. Friendship is good, but love is better. And ours—it's—older after all than the friendship, and has the first claim."

She shook her head.

"Rebecca! Why?"

For a minute she looked before her, seeing nothing. Still looking, she saw, filling the horizon, a whole wilderness of wasted youth. Softly and reverently she bent her head.

"'Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way. And the almond tree shall blossom, and desire shall fail——'"

Jasper sprang to his feet. "To hurl that damned chapter at me at such a moment! Hasn't it been flaying me alive these three days?"

"And I never thought of it in all my life save as a kingly poem until now," said she, rising and moving towards the house. "That's a man's chapter. Why, to consider it, save as a classical and elevating piece of literature, would make a woman of forty look forty on the spot. Do you want to undermine all our foundations, sap all our hopes, make hay of our multitudinous beliefs? If a woman can't believe in her own power to be the *one* exception—that every other woman but herself is in fief to the Moth of Time, what faith will remain to her?"

"Rebecca! This is beside the mark."

"It's quite near enough."

"Hold hard, dear lady. Don't bucket. Be reasonable.

There's nothing to divide us, and life alone is a cold business. Let us come together at last. I've had a hell of a time, as well you know, and I'm hanged if it's been all Heaven for you. If we can't go back to pick the flowers we've missed we can at least go forward; they're springing up still by the wayside, and the skies are as blue as ever they were." He gazed, with resolute cheerfulness, at the wooden wall of the Dispensary. "That idea about a grave was an unkind suggestion for so kind a woman, and not to the point."

"What about the twelfth Chapter of Ecclesiastes?"

"Oh! Rebecca!"

"Jasper! What if I said yes?" She swung round with startling agility and caught him.

Then of one accord they stood still and burst out laughing. Rebecca laughed till she cried. Her very knees shook with merriment. But she stopped just in time.

"Ah! well! That's two striking," said she at last, rather jerkily. "And now for luncheon."

So differently was he made the proposal was like a blow to Jasper. He shrank back.

"My dear Rebecca! Couldn't touch a mouthful."

"No man ever needed one more, or more honestly earned it. I'm not a born idiot, Jasper. This sort of thing goeth not forth save with prayer and fasting, and I'm not an ungrateful woman. You've been considering me in—in most things all my life, and you haven't failed me now. You've brought the thing to its logical conclusion triumphantly. Come! By some lucky premonition I've ordered sweet-breads."

She laid her handsome hand upon his arm, and her smile was that of a portly angel.

Jasper could have wept. Instead of doing so, in order to humour Rebecca, he ate an immense luncheon, and thoroughly enjoyed her port.

More than once he wished he had deferred the business until after luncheon.

Possibly a glimmering of this desire may have shone in his ruddy face, for when they stood up from the table, instead of leading the way to the drawing-room, Rebecca marched to the window, propped her broad back against the wall, and fiercely knitted.

"No after-luncheon relentings for me," she thought grimly.

"Now, Jasper," said she pleasantly, "I don't want to be rude, but I've had about as much of you as I can stand for one morning, and I have a dozen things to attend to."

Jasper started and stared. He now felt ready for anything. He had promptings.

But her eyes—her eyes nipped his courage, they likewise made his heart bleed.

Without a word, with a grave, stiff dignity he went to her, and stooping painfully, kissed one after the other the hands that had unweariedly been doing good since the first day he had touched them, just three-quarters of a century ago.

There was a mist before his eyes when he stood up, and through it he saw the girl of the black eyes, and the light foot, and the merry laugh, the toast of four Counties.

"Rebecca!" he cried, "Rebecca!"

She hardened her face.

"Jasper," said she, "will you look at the pigs as you go out and tell that old fool what's wrong with them. They have no more measles than I have myself. I feel it in my bones. It may comfort you to be of some practical assistance to me."

Jasper turned, and went away sorrowful.

When he was safe off the premises, Rebecca went up the stairs, and in spite of her common sense was obliged to hold on by the banisters. She tottered, in great zig-zags, across her room till she reached the big yellow ottoman, when she fell with a thud beside it, and hid her grey head in its flounces.

"How different they are from us," she moaned, "how different! It seems so odd for love to grow cold in a heart, so odd. It's as warm in me and as young as when it began fifty years ago. It's—it's just eighteen!"

Suddenly she stood up and went slowly to her glass and stared long and hard.

"To look like that outside, and to feel so sweet and fresh within!" she cried. "To be your own one unconquerable foe. The angel of the flaming sword to your own paradise! To be flouted by your own ruined face!"

Oh! this hideous, cruel, intolerable old age!" In a great anguish, she lifted her balled, threatening fists as though to crush her offending, quivering face.

The spectacle she presented in the glass, the distorted, wicked old face that there confronted her, brought back the senses of Rebecca.

With a bitter, sobbing laugh, she whipped up a towel, and flung it over the glass.

"It's enough to disgust one with the truth for the rest of one's days," she said, sitting forlornly down on the ottoman, her fingers mechanically combing her fallen hair; a most miserable Banshee.

"Love to grow old and totter," murmured the old woman, "and grow full of strange fears and have twitchings of—of gout—It's so odd. Yet, I daresay it's the more comfortable state. Little enough comfort certainly in the inner workings of the eternal things, those that keep green whilst the rest grow grey."

She pressed her hands hard upon her aching breast. "Oh, my heart! my heart!" she cried out at last in her mighty pain. "Grow old along with his and let me cease from aching a little before I die. It's too weary a pain for the old, dear Lord."

She lifted herself after a long rest, and went quietly back to the glass to brush her hair.

"But after all," she said at last, "the old age of a man must be as sorrowful with the weight of a half dead thing always in his breast. I'd rather stick to my pain."

"Dear Lord," she said presently, kneeling down, with the most extraordinary little laugh, "after all I'll keep my love alive and young in my heart. I'll ask for none of the anodynes of my years. The one little spot of everlasting youth in an old heart has its drawbacks, but it is too good a thing to barter for shameful ease."

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN Heron, having by honest labour steeled himself against vain and vagrant sentiment, and was strolling towards the Vicarage along a cool, green lane, he was astonished to see George not a hundred yards ahead, leaning over a gate, sunk plainly enough in profound dejection.

Heron paused to stare.

The suggestion of surrender evident in the broad back, the inertness in the strong, alive shoulders, contradicted all his preconceived notions of George.

The modest ordered confidence in himself and every one he came across that seemed to possess George, and make his presence, wherever it appeared, a centre of stimulation, vitalising thought and outlook, dividing him from all his tribe, lifting him and his profession clear-cut and keen from out a blurred web of mists, now seemed sunken in that indistinct and hazy back.

The palpitating life of spirit, body and brain, individual to the man, every part of him, was a thing one looked for, one expected just as one expects to find the living, warming, fructifying sun in some men's pictures.

The present spectacle of a stripped George was a positive shock to Heron.

In spite of acquired stoicism, Captain Heron was peculiarly susceptible to certain influences, and little as he knew it he had still a healthy and ravenous young appetite for illusions.

He now whistled under his breath.

"Spares her his moods, seemingly. Wonder, by the way, if she wouldn't rather enjoy one on occasion—for a

change. You can't bet on anything where a woman is concerned. However, s'pose I'd better clear out."

With that, he was about to vault over a breach in the fence, when George lifted himself up and saw him.

"Well met," he called out cordially, "I've had just as much of my own company as I want. Hardly a compliment to foist it on you, perhaps you're thinking, but it's a relief, anyway, to me."

He stretched lazily, and opened the gate. "This," he said, "is our nearest road home."

"Pity," he began, after a moment's pause, "you can't deal with yourself, as, for sheer decency's sake, you're forced to deal with your fellows, through the veil of civilisation. After all, you could appreciate your own civility as well as another man's, yet it's the one blessing reserved for your betters."

Heron was experiencing some genuine anxiety.

"Been soul-digging—this parson—form of agricultural labour that don't pay," he reflected rapidly, "especially with experts."

"Politeness would hardly suit *my* case," he said easily. "A good rousing swear is more to the point. It clears the air, squares things generally. You feel fresher to go on again."

George laughed.

"That's good enough for ordinary occasions, but suppose an extraordinary one comes along. Oh! your time will come, and if it does"—George swung round and shrewdly looked at him—"I'm a good deal mistaken if you don't find yourself as tough a subject to tackle as myself, and as little inclined to yield to reason."

"Hem! Problems aren't much in my way."

Much as he admired George, for the Church, Rob had a constitutional distrust. It was too vast for companionship; he wanted, just at the moment, to talk to a man.

As it happened, this precisely was what George also desired.

"Problems! Any problem, given air enough, you can live down. I'm talking of the things in life that have got to be *done*."

George had been going through days of hard, stubborn struggle, the result of which needed threshing out in homely,

human words. He had taken a strong liking for Heron, and so used was he to the giving out of kindness, that if he happened to want any for himself, once sure of his man, he never hesitated about demanding his right.

"Are you afraid I'm letting you in for a mental spring-cleaning, with the buckets and mops all over the shop? Not I. Suffer too much myself in the parish from that sort of thing. I've just left one. The lady enjoyed the mess immensely, explained and demonstrated the uses of each article with elaboration. She finds much more moving interest in the next step than ever she could in the finished plan. She'll be itching, that amazing female, when all's done, for the time of disruption to come round again, to break some man's shins and slumbers and her own monotony."

"Lord! How do you stand it all?"

"Oh, it's all right. I wish they weren't so like it mentally though. They so thoroughly enjoy a haul over of their inwards. Every second woman you meet is at heart a mediæval Catholic. But now she puts it into words.

"Peas in her shoes would be less trying to her husband and her spiritual adviser," suggested Heron.

"But not so soothing to her."

"I wish he'd get on," thought Heron.

George sincerely wished he could, but suddenly the subject had grown difficult.

They were now on the top of the hill opposite the Vicarage garden, and could see Joan in a white dress leaning back in her chair, young Fred above her, waving a branch. The baby and nurse were coming in little runs across the lawn, and all the white roses looked red in the sunset.

The old Church, stately, silent, full of a great significance, stood out upon the rise. Silvern it was with great memories, golden with hopes, grey with anguish. The village nestled at its feet, all its littlenesses hidden in a soft haze.

The home-coming cows lowed softly as they crossed the bridge. The children played tirelessly upon the green, and in the distance their voices rang sweet.

The peaceful beauty of the scene struck both men keenly.

"It's a fragrant setting for a woman's life," said George abruptly. "The Church, the roses, the infinite rest in that

brook's song never seemed so exquisite as they do to-day, when I've decided to leave them."

"I thought something of that sort was coming," said Heron quietly, his eyes kindling. "Will you tell me why?"

"It's a long story, but I'll run it through before we get home. I want to know just how it strikes you. A reasonable layman's opinion has never failed me yet.

"You see, there's plenty to do in this big, straggling parish for a man over forty, but under it there's rather too big a margin to give up to your own pursuits, especially if you've got a steam-engine in your brain and must keep it in working order. I have a friend over there," he nodded in the direction of Miss Rebecca's kingdom, "who is running a race with death. For a score of reasons he must finish an invention before he goes under, but a man can talk and invent at the same time, and the words of a good man dying, with all his wits cleared by the process, stick.

"He knows the tight-packed poor down to the ground. What can be done for them, and what can't. It's an engrossing subject as he puts it, but urgent. And a man in his full strength can't talk for ever. So in the natural course of things, one day I left talking and set to work to help an old fellow at Aiken, who had just buried everything, more especially his power to handle curates, in his wife's grave. Things were all at loose ends, and since my assistance was, of course, ex-officio, you will understand the difficulties. But I don't think any one resented me. We've always, all of us, pulled well together.

"Now Aiken's dying, the living is in his family, and he wants my promise to succeed him, before he goes.

"I've had to decide at once." George paused to look again at the garden and the westering sun. "It's sordid, squalid, awful over there. So long as the work was optional, there was, indeed, an extraordinary fascination in it, an extraordinary stimulation. Now that it's to be part of the day's work, it's a grind, I tell you."

"What does Mrs. Winington say?" enquired Heron in a commentless way.

"She doesn't know yet. It's not a question to be talked over, but a thing to be done. If it's a question of taking

a big fence that must be taken, and is possible, it's for a man to give a woman the lead over, not to discuss the size of it with her. My wife is a woman of high courage."

All at once his face shone in a ridiculous way. "She can take her fences like a bird," said he, "she reaches things in her own way, and always rightly, and the ways of women are not our ways. They spring to the light often where we grope."

Heron groaned inwardly. The humility of this parson had a queer charm; it was genuine, straight and simple, and free of all servility, and in the deepest stoop of his spirit he was a proud man, as proud as Lucifer. Hence his strength and power, and hence his weakness. Such humility now applied to Mrs. George as Heron recalled her naïve jibbings, struck him as being singular.

"Even if we do hunt in couples, Joan and I," pursued George; "if I'm ass enough to get off the scent, as I've been doing about Aiken just now, there's no need to include her in my efforts to get on to it again, to load her with the gross burthens." His face shone worse than ever.

Heron felt like the apostles on the hill.

"She's not the sort of woman you want to drag into your own particular spring-cleaning, amongst the pails and mops."

"Don't you think," said Heron, "that women like to see how men arrive at big results."

"A woman can be poles apart from women."

"Don't women sometimes see both duty and religion through a man's eyes," persisted Heron coolly.

"Women do. Joan doesn't. She is the most innately religious woman I have met. She lives and breathes her religion. She *is* her religion."

"Now," thought Heron, "who is to combat misunderstanding so profound as this?"

"Are you in doubt?" said George. "Go down to the village—to the marsh, and see."

"Does she enjoy the village and the marsh?"

"She leaves joy behind her."

"She is the sweetest woman I have ever known. At the same time, a mistaken sense of duty has played hell with a lot of lives. And a sense of duty, if you'll excuse my

saying, isn't always quite safe in the hands of women and priests."

"I was brought up as a man," said George good-humouredly.

"You *are* a man. I shouldn't have said it else."

"And you're a soldier. If you had an obvious duty to face, would you consult your wife until you'd got over your queasy-mindedness and decided to do the straight thing?"

"Oh, I grant you that, and yet——"

"There are scores of yets, but not one of 'em holds an argument."

"Spiritual chores are so painfully complicated with dirt and general unpleasantness," said Heron abruptly. "Mrs. Winnington has a wonderful way of enjoying herself."

George halted, and looked at him.

"I should like you to know my wife, really. Know her as she is. Her nature, with all her quiet ways, is the most generous, lavish, spacious, that I have ever known. As a rule, young women haven't much holding capacity. But Joan, I verily believe, could hold everything, and enjoy each after its kind and in its turn."

Heron swallowed a mouthful of arguments.

"You might as well try to convince the ghost of St. John," he reflected. "He'll be the death of the poor little thing in the end. I'd better change the subject."

"What's been your own worst complication in this business?" said he.

"I've been wanting London and the 'agreeable classes' this long time pretty hard, and I've read too many fairy tales with too keen a zest to give up expecting the intervention of some miracle. Until the last moment I hoped it might still be London. I have an offer there open this long time. I have other work beside my profession. Has Joan told you? Oh! she has. She's one with me in that, too. I believe those sonnets are good. I'm not sure that they're not Literature. Aiken isn't just the place for that sort of thing."

"I know more of soldiering than I do of religion," said Heron, "but I can tell a poem when I see one. Would you mind letting me see yours?"

"Last night when you were reading Heine, I saw you understood, and I hoped you'd ask," said George simply.

George sang again that night. The brilliant, pleasant rejoicing religiosity in his voice as it poured forth some hidden Holy of Holies, as an episode, enthralled Heron. As a fire-side gift it gave him dread visions of an unwinking all-night sun, an unceasing choir of tireless disembodied angels.

He found genius, however, in the poem.

The thoughts were those that float like spirits in the air, too bright and pure for common words or the gross mouths of men, that fire men's brains, however, in the sad nights, make life possible, and God no delusion.

But George had laid bold and reverent hands upon them, given them concrete form, and clothed them in royal purple.

Directly he had read half-a-dozen, Rob Heron went hot-foot to George doing choir accounts in his study, and forgetting to knock, planted himself square upon the table.

"This is genius," said he, "and Aiken won't hurt it, however it may bore you. But the 'agreeable classes' must get a sight of you first. I know several of them, by the way, and I have an empty flat on my hands, on the embankment. You must take pity on it, you and Mrs. George. I want you to know my uncle, Bob Grant, the Bishop of Slough, who wrote 'The New Venite.'"

George sprang to his feet. "But why——" he broke off short.

Heron shrugged his shoulders.

"Why did he stop at that?" he said. "He had to take his wife to no end of dinners and things, and attend to his own shop, too. When she was tired out at last with the racket, and took to Committees and Teetotalism for the Lower Orders—they have a fine ancestral cellar of their own down in Cheshire—and Bob Grant got back to his study, somehow it wouldn't come. He had grown old, so he said."

"Ah, Ah!" said George under his breath. "You must do this sort of thing young," he presently added, "so as to keep all its fragrance intact. It's a race with time."

"You have your work cut out for you, Winnington," said Heron, turning away with a queer laugh. "And so has she, by Jove!" he added presently, to the moon above the pines.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I'm sorry," said Joan, "I'm sorry." She stood in the purple twilight looking with an odd feeling of excited terror at George.

It was the evening of the day their guests had left them.

Young Jasper was asleep, the maids quietly sewing; the silence of the house had driven Joan into the garden. Moreover, her head ached. The remnants of all the delicacies had been collected and despatched to the marsh, and they had supped on cheese.

The garden was not very gay that night. The very birds seemed too dull to sing. The only alive thing about the place appeared to be a brown owl which hooted sadly from the door-step of his disorderly house.

The heavy air slammed down upon Joan's head like a lid. But she forgot her aches presently when she began to think of London.

London held everything, and she and George stood now upon the threshold of that Empire; and then her radiant face had turned to behold George, in anything but an imperial mood, advancing up the path.

He brightened at sight of her, and without a word put an open letter into her hand. It was a brief announcement of Mr. Abel's death.

"I'm sorry," again said Joan. She felt in a sort of agony really. She wondered why; she had respected Mr. Abel sincerely, his admiring reverence for George had always pleased her.

Otherwise he was an old man throbbing with Parish; a most haunting mole under his left eye. It had spoilt many a light luncheon for Joan.

"It's not a matter for sorrow, darling," said George soothingly. "No one could have kept on much longer, few for so long, at the work Abel had to do, without some innermost ideal near and alive, to breathe new life and soul into him, day by day, and keep his lamps alight. He had found this help always in the strong benign influence of his wife. He probably should have attended to his lamps himself," admitted George, "but it's a way a man will fall into at any time, given the chance. And when the kindly hands that have been helping him all his days are suddenly removed, and he finds all the grinding, uncongenial work thrown suddenly upon him as he gets down into the dim valleys of life with failing eyes and tremulous hands—why, one can't be sorry that he's reached the great Light at last, and lamp-trimming is, for ever, at an end. He did his best always, and worked hard."

"And the work is still there as big as when he found it," said Joan, with slowly dilating eyes.

She saw things in George's face that were slowly turning her into a horrible sort of stone, as full of eyes as a peacock's tail.

"'God's in his Heaven,' and there's a fascination in size," said George.

Directly she saw him she had feared the worst, now she knew it had come.

Upon occasion Joan's moods could tumble one upon the heels of the other like a rush of great beasts.

Her state of stone now incontinently precipitated itself into a passion of revolt. George's face meant Aiken; Aiken meant extinction and outer darkness; a riot of evil smells; the end of everything; a chronic settling down into holiness, an intangible maze of curates, an ocean of beef-tea. All this did his wife see in the poor saint's face. And with London at their feet! At her feet and George's!

The promises upon which she had been feeding herself these three days crumbled to ashes in Joan's hands. They had been full of fire and a towering sublimity, and fell with a mightier force than will lesser structures. For Joan's faith in her husband's possibilities, given opportunity, the one thing lacking, was absolute, and to put bit and bridle

upon expectations as logical as they were legitimate would have seemed to her to cast a doubt upon George.

This mood had of late been plentifully watered by the frank admiration of Fred and Heron for George as man and Priest. And Rob's genuine delight in the sonnets had hardened and crystallised her own half vague, dazzled, conclusions in regard to them.

Captain Heron Joan knew to be a man of strong intellect who had lived amongst men, and he was quite as diffident and as doubtful and bewildered in the presence of spirit as she herself was; for she had found out a good deal about her visitor in Church.

"He'd know in an earthly, trustworthy and wholly satisfactory way—he'd Know," she often told herself.

His face, indeed, as he read extracts from George's heaps of MS. the previous night had more than once reminded her of George himself, with a moustache and a difference. It strengthened her in her belief that he'd know in precisely the right way.

"And if the genius of George worked like this in a fastidious man, what might it not do with a world that will swallow anything?" she thought sadly. "Anything in the shape of a clergyman."

Until felled by the direct blow of a cheese supper, Joan had indeed floated for a full hour that evening in a chariot of fire.

And now she had come down to one minute of London and an eternity of Aiken.

George, she reflected, taking in with a gasp the width of his shoulders, had twice the strength of Mr. Abel, and he had held out for five-and-forty years. Joan's wits were in good sound order. But throughout all the turmoils she clung stubbornly to her smile.

It helped George greatly.

"It's never the size of anything that can appal one," he persisted, "it's the pettiness."

"But the bigger a thing the—the more pettiness it can gather into the corners," she meekly suggested.

"The more sun one can let in to clear it out," he cheerily explained. "Don't you think it's rather a comfort that Aiken, as you guessed at once, has been chosen for us; that it's a leading we must obey? We shouldn't

have chosen it. It is hard to lose this." He looked greedily out through the beautiful purple of the evening. "But we can't all be swallows flying south."

There was a world of tenderness in George's face as he watched the wonderful reticent dignity in the girl's bearing, her resolution against any babble of vain words.

"Thank God I've got myself a bit in hand. I can help her perhaps," thought he.

"This is the one thing," he said, with extraordinary gentleness, "in which we must be parted for just a little, you and I, but we'll soon come together again. I got through this part yesterday, more or less. It will come to you to-morrow, the whisper—the stir, the stress. It's in the blood of all of us. It's driven some of us to the ends of the earth, and a few of us not far from Heaven. And the women travel always in the van. It's the way of the English. It's not a noteworthy journey that we've got to go together, dear, nor is it very rosy with hope," he said, "but we know wherein our help lieth."

George brought out his morsels of consolation absently, at random, for his own soothing as well as hers.

First it was her pain alone that filled him, but side by side with her, as usual, they melted and mixed, her pain and his, and his by the admixture of her's had grown a thousand-fold.

"So this is the great Act of Renunciation. This is Crucifixion," thought Joan, "the sort of thing I have often longed for. I used to see George in all the tortures; boiling in oil like St. John; on the cross on his head like St. Peter, transfixed with darts like St. Sebastian. It would have seemed like an insult to George to spare him *anything*. I used really to enjoy it. It seemed so splendid to be a small part of such immense greatness. One felt so thoroughly in the midst of things; and now—now it's come—it's grown dull. George once on your mind as the centre of a brilliant crowd, you can't get him right—you can't sink him in soup-tickets, and goose-clubs."

She recalled suddenly a long exhortation of poor, tired, old Abel upon the subject of a goose-club delivered sermonically to a dazed young 'Varsity man throbbing with high purpose.

"He left the next week, the poor young man," she thought, with a sympathetic sigh, and looked up to see George's face turned away from her, full of a pain she had never before beholden in it.

She paused breathless.

"George—George is also dying for London," she thought, cold with awe. "That young man was a coward, and George—oh! he's sickeningly right—I wonder if he guesses—if he possibly could guess how I feel—I've smiled so carefully."

All Joan's other dreads were now paralysed in the overmastering one of being ineffectual to George in a great moment.

And meanwhile the devil was at George's elbow showing him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, filling his poet's soul with an inextinguishable loathing for Aiken.

The logic of Satan was magnificent, and side by side with it ran Heron's words, "A sense of duty is not always safe in the hands of women and Priests." Women and Priests! Was the partnership founded upon a sneer thus to be an eternal one? Were they, the minds of priests and women, sealed in common, that they should fail to see things as good men and true, see them?

The difficult path need not necessarily be the right one. The first leading was not invariably the true one.

George shook and trembled in the cold blast of doubt.

Was this mighty sacrifice after all the mere, morbid, purposeless whipping of a back unfitted to fleshly lusts? a playing with martyrdom?

Given subtle hearts and strong brains to deal with, a man with a multiplicity of gifts could do anything. A *man* could touch the men who think sharper than any *poem*. His life could live longer amongst them, his memory smell sweeter.

With such people where one gift failed, the others could be brought into play.

At Aiken all this would go to waste. One arm must wither for the want of use whilst the other struck ineffectual strokes.

The devil made wise by his long acquaintance with the old Adam, seeing the time ripe for it, here shot into

George's tired heart a dart upon which he had not yet ventured.

"If only Joan would resist," he suddenly found himself thinking. "Is she would plead *herself*—the child!"

George was no more than man, less indeed, he admitted with some honest wisdom, being a poet, Joan—could be no more than woman.

Joan—Joan should give the casting vote.

George turned upon her, a great demand in his face.

And then Joan forgot everything—forgot even her child, and thought only of the greatness of George; the greatness that under all conditions it was hers to uphold.

The set-apartness of George, his aloofness from common earth and common men, the things that so often had lurked, a bitter sob, in Joan's carnal heart, now flew out and about George's head, a flock of white doves challenging to the right this poor little Pagan.

"Priests and women," George was thinking in the moment of silence. His soul was red-hot with wrath, torn with ambition, rent in twain with the throbbing of earthly desire, his heart was sick for himself and for Joan. His manhood was all blown to pieces in the wild storm of his youth.

"Priests and women," he thought again as he waited hanging upon a woman's last words.

The words were not ready yet for a minute, but Joan's hand went out to him, it rested, cool and light, upon his, and upon the happiest inspiration of her whole life; suddenly Joan began to laugh softly.

Her laugh acted like good wine upon the stricken man.

"George, don't think I'm horrid," she said at last, "I'm not really. But the actual fact of Aiken was like running up against a wall. I think it—sort of stunned me. Aiken's a—a facer," said she, quoting Fred. "But now it's faced we'll recover in time. You'd have to do right in the end, of course, so it was much better to go straight at it. I can't get used to Aiken yet—but if you did wrong—oh! George! if you did wrong! Just now when you suffered horribly—oh! I saw—how could you expect to deceive me? Were you thinking I was going to fail you?"

"You," he faltered, "my very dearest! No!"

He paused to gather words in which to make his confession to her, but upon the threshold of his disclosure he paused. Why should he burthen and distress her with *his* loads? Why heap his pain upon the top of hers?

The bald, brutal fact of his cowardice could only tear and torment her, rob her of her courage. And he could take care of his own repenting.

Had he but known it, the recital of this very mean moment in the life of a saint would have been of the greatest assistance to the heathen heart of that saint's wife. But thus do men spare women.

"Do you know," said George, after a long pause, "that you've given the casting vote for Aiken? That this is the moment of my real decision. It's an absolutely right decision. I could never now go back from it. And you're the truest, dearest, wisest wife that ever man had."

"Oh! George, if you could see me turned inside out I think, I really think you'd die of it."

"Beloved!"

"I'm not anxious you should, believe me! I want you always to keep on thinking me just exactly what you think I ought to be. It keeps one going——" Suddenly she strayed away from her subject.

"Oh!" she cried, "the roses, how they smell, and the nightingales have begun again."

"Joan!" said George in a low voice; "you haven't once spoken of the boy."

"The boy's yours as well as mine, part of both of us. We won't speak of him to-night." She drew herself out of George's arms and stood up squarely.

The thought of little Jasper seemed to undo everything. She resolutely refused to think of him.

"The roses and the nightingales and the general disturbance make one hungry," she said. "The servants are gone to bed, and there are three new laid eggs on the pantry shelf. George! don't do poetry to-night"—her face was irresistible—"and we'll boil the eggs and have another supper. They were for you to take to Widow Hone, but she's much better really; and she beats them up with gin in a green tumbler; it's a dreadful sight. They'll do us much more good if we celebrate the move to Aiken in them."

"I think we may devour the eggs with a clear conscience, and let the Widow Hone temper her gin with water for once," said George, rousing himself.

And together they had a merry meal laid out at random upon the snowy kitchen table.

But just in the middle Joan experienced a moment of sadness, so profound that she simply had to do something to scotch it, so that it did not spread to George.

A sudden invincible desire to snatch the dull hideousness out of the horizon—out of the atmosphere—to dramatise, so to speak, this abominable act of renunciation, seized Joan.

She threw thought, regret, fear, despair to the winds, took hold of the sceptre of fascination given to each woman at birth and mostly mislaid—the one sceptre to which a tired world will always bow gleefully—and wielded it like a queen.

She moved, bewitched, dominated George.

She lifted him out of the slough into which in each silence he kept slipping back, and his splendid trust in himself restored, she began to amuse him.

She drew upon parts of herself that had, save unconsciously, when with Heron, not yet seen the light. She unearthed unexpected bits of George, and the laughter of the two rippled through the silent house.

But the dark places of the earth held unspeakable paralysing horrors for Joan. And they—oh!—but they grew in spite of all her efforts, they grew. To save herself she must make another effort to throw upon the darkness some artificial light of her own generating.

She would see just to what extent she could move George. She would try experiments. It was a wild game of a wild heart, and Joan played it magnificently.

Whilst George gave himself up to the charm of it and basked in its renewing glow.

Joan seemed to strip Aiken of its worst horrors.

"I could make him do anything," she said, as she went at last tiredly up the stairs. "A woman could make a man do anything once she knows how. Now I've learnt, and I could make George give up Aiken——" She paused abruptly. "And I feel like Herodias. But I don't think that even Herodias would have asked *George* for John

the Baptist's head on a charger. No thanks, however, to her, it's because he's George. I wonder——" she paused, her foot upon the last step, "I wonder what George would think if he knew I could possibly feel like—that sort of woman. It's been a curious evening. I'm glad I didn't cry. But to be Herodias, and I George's wife! It's odd!"

Jasper was moaning in his sleep softly, Joan went in and crouched down beside his cot, and in the sob of a sorrowful little mother she cast out Herodias.

Joan upon the side of the angels was a bulwark of strength that night to George as he wrestled with God because of his back-sliding. His victory came only with the dawn, but he was not too tired even then to write down hastily, "A thought upon a perfect wife."

The heart-beat of a saint in four lines.

CHAPTER XXIV.

So George, Joan, and the Sonnets went forth into the great world, and the two old friends, when not panting in the wild wake of Jasper minor, sat together by the fire to deplore George's latest and ultimate folly.

Joan, against all protest, had gone townward, clothed by Miss Rebecca's bounty in purple and fine linen, fashioned through Beatrice's intervention, by an excellent dressmaker.

Miss Rebecca's stern conviction that in thus doing she was but casting flowers upon another grave, threw at first a lurid shadow upon the gifts, and spoilt their freshness. But for once, in a disappointing life, Hope gave regally all she had promised, and in a day the color and delight were back again in all the garments, and London seemed to Joan to be humming with the joys of Paradise.

The flat above the Embankment had been bequeathed to Heron by an uncle who liked Life well. It held many things for the pleasure of a man's body; more for the contentment of his mind. And below him, for his soul's sake, flowed the River, which to him who has ears to hear, holds the clues to all the stories of all the world.

Several of George's old friends found them out, and a selected few of Beatrice's.

And those Heron brought he took good care should be of the best.

Fred, fresh with perennial youth, and laden with roses, became part of the household.

In a week, the Bishop came in and out, regardless of time or season. He had not yet made up his mind which of the two young people he best liked. But since he feared most for Joan, he came, perhaps, oftener to see her.

His friendship for George had a more personal and intimate savour.

Having considered the young man officially, so to speak, he made his reverent obeisance before the fineness and rarity of his soul as priest ; he then plunged into his sonnets, ransacked the drawer which held the stock-in-trade for more, and went ravenously, breathlessly, through every least last scrawl.

Whereupon he renewed his youth, forgot Theodosia, his wife, now prancing round under the lash of a Theosophy, which in the hands of active Western femininity had lost all its mighty calm, and took up his pen again.

But those lost things come not back.

The Bishop worked off his despair in a fierce polemic against commercial immorality, a subject which needed all the language at his disposal, from which yet he conscientiously conceived that he could exclude all personal feeling.

For in spite of his episcopal income, owing to Theodosia, and a trustful heart with a fatal inability to say "no" to a sad countenance, he was as poor as a Jesuit.

His resignation he threw into his warm, ungrudging praise of George's work, his wise admonishings, his practical counsels.

Two or three of the poems struck him as incomparable, so he had carried them off to read again. They were bright with some light from elsewhere, and thrilling with the red life of earth ; the red thrilling life that ran through every line of them. They were warm with fire stolen from Heaven ; of a more genial and human glow than any beside which he had been vainly trying to thaw his frozen heart for many a chilled year.

He now stood in the doorway of Joan's drawing-room, a bundle of papers in his hand, watching Joan wielding her new sceptre in a small and pleasant crowd.

George caught up in some Paradise not yet open to the public, stood in the window.

"It's she who's brought in this engaging element of earth," said John Hilary to himself, "without her it would have been too fine-drawn for 'human nature's daily needs.' No earthly publisher, however high-minded, can consider Angels' food, pure and simple, with the Trade in the state it is. It's her touch that will secure fame for him, possibly an income for the Aiken crusade, or crucifixion. Which?"

He went over and touched George on the shoulder.

"Two monthlies will be out in less than a week, and these two things of yours are going into them. The editors thought it pretty sharp practice on my part—suggested next month. But I had 'em on toast. They owe me something. I've given decent death and burial to a score of honest jingles for both gentlemen, and written many a courteous epitaph for the consoling of valuable subscribers. They think well of my services, and I never press for cheques. What about putting your own name to these?"

"I hadn't got to that," said George, trying to steady his voice, which fairly trembled with exultant delight.

"If you hadn't I feel certain your wife has reached it long ago. She has a constitutional distaste for lights hid under bushels. Also if a man believes in himself anonymity is a pose. The Church, moreover, needs the spur of genius, and it's an abiding joy to whip the Laity in fair fight at anything." The Bishop in his unregenerate days had been the best boxer at Oxford. "So in they go, name and profession both. When I've finished planting these, I'll come back to dinner, and for fee as literary agent, let me break the news to Mrs. George."

So Joan woke up one day to find her dream fulfilled.

George was the Coming Man, and his words were working in the hearts and brains of men.

Although, so far, they had not reached women.

This gave calmness to his first fame, and a reverent decorousness that pleased Joan. It would have spoilt every-

thing to see women—the women who buzz—buzzing around George.

She thought of Mrs. Worrall, and shivered.

But presently a few ladies selected by Heron did come, and then Joan's cup was full.

They were stately people with the grand air, and their ways and words were made perfect with kindness.

In the wife of the young poet whom Heron had scarcely mentioned, they found a distinct relief.

In their aloof, gracious way, they had quailed before their private conception of this young person.

Joan, however, by this time, was aware of her power, and could forget herself by habit, and so was ready for any woman in London. She brought all her wonted interests in amongst them, and followed them, as unruffled and unassuming in demeanour as a brown bird in her own hedge, in the presence of kings.

Captain Heron's friends seemed to her the easiest and most reassuring women she had yet met. They thoroughly understood George's sonnets, and made acute guesses at George himself.

It was the most natural thing in the world to be with them, and to be happy in their presence.

But it was the possibilities for sadness that these bright-eyed women detected in the young wife which rivetted *their* attention upon her. Otherwise, she had, perhaps, suggested rural insipidity. This was the last touch demanded of the True Romance, and directly she had got over her delicate excitement in regard to the new poet of the Spirit, more than one grand and gracious dame was quite prepared to "take up" the more earthly half of the Prophet, in the shape of his wife, who, judging by all authenticated precedent, would surely need the shepherding of one who knows Man.

But, meanwhile, they were moved, one and all, by another wistfulness common to all their kind.

No woman breathing who has once touched life but is waiting for her one sermon in Church, Chapel, Meeting-house, Freethought Hall, or the great Out-of-doors.

A few hear it early, and comforted, go softly all their days.

Others miss it at the beginning, and reject henceforth,

with bitter arrogance, the stones given them in lack of bread.

The great remainder may haply fill their aching void in some happier Elsewhere.

But every woman who met George, spiritually discerned in him that for which she had been waiting all her life, and panted to behold him in a pulpit.

He was flooded with flattering requests to flesh his maiden sword upon select congregations.

Fortunately for himself, George never yet stood in a pulpit burthened by the yoke of himself. He took care to fill himself beforehand with all the knowledge he could hold, and being a poet, selected and polished his words like gems. Thus faithfully prepared, he frequently forgot his notes, and the gift of tongues had never yet been withheld him. In London, as in his country parish, he calmly paused, when he had finished, to search the faces of his congregation, and, as in the case of his song, would inevitably have begun again, had his eyes beholden either misinterpretation or blank space.

He descended the steps of Church or Cathedral with as high and simple a confidence in God and in himself as God's Vicar, as he had mounted them, and even upon the morning of his first startling success, was in no sort of way lifted up personally.

Had, however, the ovation for which he looked, not appeared in that sea of faces brilliant with critical intellect, he would have felt both fool and traitor.

But Joan experienced all the delirious exultation of a popular preacher. Her passion of overmastering pride nothing could hold down.

She betrayed every atom of her to the Bishop, and proved beyond question to the appraising matrons that they had judged aright. Here was precisely the wife of a Rising Saint. They would have no need to regret having stretched forth to her the helping hand.

For once was virtue justified of herself.

Each lady looked up Church Patrons in Whitak̄r, and set the ball rolling in Club and Palace.

Amused, exasperated, distressed, George saw what was afoot, and held his peace. The matter of Aiken had been decided. Until directly assailed upon a fixed decision, he

had no need to discuss the wisdom or the folly of it. Their wounds, both his and Joan's, were yet too raw to be torn open again.

And being young and in magnificent health, the spirit of "let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die," contended in the sub-consciousness of George, with the legitimate strivings of the Holy Ghost.

George was wonderfully human, those weeks of his two great successes.

And when forced upon his thoughts, even Aiken he could face boldly. Fortified by the pride of life, the joy and stimulation of a one-handed big fight that would never fail him, the delight of conquest, the fructifying impulse of *any* crowd, there was a sense of invulnerability about George. Above all was he uplifted by the growing conviction that his creative power was not founded upon any illusion; that it would bear the brunt of strain and stress, and was no vain shuttle-cock of circumstances. Aiken was a big dragon in a man's path, but the young Vicar had an iron constitution, a digestion that feared nothing, high faith, and a wife who knew what he wanted.

To Joan, with no constitution to speak of, a squeamish stomach, her faith founded upon George, who did not know in the least what she wanted, or how passionately she desired it, Aiken was unsoftened by one alleviating circumstance.

And through all the glow and glamour of her little hour, it now began to gnaw again, a hoary, rapacious, reprobate old fox.

Heron found her out one day when she and Fred were going over the very newest opera.

George was absorbed in the Bishop, so practically there was nothing left for Captain Heron but to observe George's wife.

He had never forgotten the revelation of intoxicating gaiety that had distinguished Mrs. Winnington's first venture into comic song. It was a chastened voice that now trilled out the measures. An odd regret breathed through all the merry song. It struck Heron that the singer was not unlike a swan saying a last good-bye at the beginning of a long life instead of at the end.

An uncomfortable innovation. He wondered if the girl

had herself any inkling of the weird suggestion. It was becoming a constant question with him, how much Joan really did know or apprehend.

Some women, he was aware, can slip into a life of self-sacrifice, blindfold. They are frequently tender-eyed, these biddable souls, but they do not, perhaps, quite realize their pain until it kills them.

Others go wide-eyed, and anticipate every pang. But their eyes under no circumstances show pink rims, and they keep proudly to the end, all the pleasant curves of happiness.

This girl belonged to neither variety of type. He could not place her, and baffled at last by vain imaginings, he turned his thoughts merely to amusing her, and then and there arranged an evening at a roaring Farce for her, and a supper at The Savoy.

It was from this day that he fell persistently to blotting out Aiken for George's wife, and helping her to grasp life with both hands.

Once started it was an engrossing game. Gaiety, he soon found, was the natural element of the Vicar's wife, and as a pleasure-seeker she was tireless.

More than once when Captain Heron perceived George's eyes dwelling, dim with unseeing love upon his wife, breathless with carnal enjoyment, he could have kicked the fellow. The next minute he was, however, just as ready to kick himself for so irrational a prompting.

Poet, preacher, priest and man, wrapped up all in one envelope, cannot be expected to plumb the frivolity of a woman, as a sinful man, guiltless of aliases may. Sometimes Rob called Philosophy to his aid. "A girl," he argued, "who could subsist spiritually upon the crumbs from any man's table, given an ordinary husband, would be an ordinary woman."

But even when her seams went crooked at the waist, Mrs. George had never looked precisely as one expects either a born worker or a Vicar's wife to look.

There was a fascinating disturbance in the contemplation of the girl, and the yawning chasm somewhere ahead of her that invariably blocked his view. It was, he was persuaded, quite in the running that some day she would stand upon the near edge of this chasm, George upon the farther,

and nothing but some bridge, strong with humanity, would bring the two together again.

It was a profitless study. Whenever he possibly could do so, Heron left it and amused Joan.

But the clock of time clicked on, and having gone together through a bushel of ideas for poems, and skirmished over many a sermon, one day George and the Bishop, of one accord, paused, laughed, stretched, and looked in each other's faces.

"Now," said the Bishop, "we'd better get through with Aiken."

"Go ahead," said George. "However well disposed towards procrastination, we couldn't put it off much longer."

The Bishop laid his hands upon a bundle of papers.

"This," said he, "this part of you—is outside the question. It won't suffer. It would ripen and bring forth fruit in a dungeon. Nothing but 'that which cometh from within' will interfere with your inspiration." He paused to look at George, his acute, ugly face quick with life.

"You can't escape from heritage. I wonder what your weak point is."

"I thought you'd have found it out by this time."

"Don't underrate my acuteness. I've found out scores. Man! you're a poet! But so far *It* has escaped me. When *It* appears it will be ferociously weak. There's a great deal of the animal as yet undisturbed under that soul of yours, George. And dogs, however willing to let 'em lie we are, won't always oblige us in that particular. Look at your habit of devouring anything set before you without turning a hair. I saw you last night consume English melted butter, and burnt at that, with the placid content of a Newfoundland dog."

The Bishop, in order to thwart his natural leanings towards aesthetic gormandising, supported life mostly on chops.

"When it appears," he pursued, with serenity, "it will be a crude weakness that will astonish the lot of us, yourself most of all. It's difficult to defend yourself against an unknown adversary, still less to scotch him with prayer, so for the present we'll leave him. Never be too cock-sure, however, till he's shewn his cloven hoof. If a thing's strong in a strong man—its bound to crop up at the most

inconvenient moment. 'Lest I myself should be a cast-away.' That's the most profoundly sad, the most profoundly human thing St. Paul ever said."

"I wonder how you found out all this," said George. "I've known this long time that I have forces somewhere about me that only need some touch, not yet given, to come out and raven."

"Ah!" said the Bishop, after a pause, "you're both very young. And this brings us to the woman inevitable in every business. Nothing will keep her out," he mused sorrowfully, "nothing, Celibacy least of all. Throws but a more lurid light upon her, that refuge of cowards, thus fixing her significance. Let us look upon this fact as proven, else we'll never get on at all. As for St. Paul's advice, the value of it is somewhat bounded by time and climate. We never allow enough to social and climatic differences in our interpretations of Scripture—Judaism and orientalism in the blood will colour the thought of the writers.

"When St. Paul, for example," said John absently, "penned exhortations to those weaker brethren possessed of more than one wife, it was, no doubt, a facer to some. Time has put all that right. 'Be a ruler in his own household—'" he murmured, in the sympathy of a true friendship, forgetting George. "St. Paul, you will admit," he presently resumed, "had *not* encountered the Invincible Modern."

George, moving to put his manuscript away, recalled the divine, for an instant, to current events.

"This is, however, not the point. Though when you come to think of it," said John Hilary, again wandering off suddenly, "there is a new spirit in the youth of the present-day woman, a more urgent, rampant, rapacious awakening of enterprise in all her senses than there used to be; she likes her air in big draughts, her light in torrents, her exercise in avalanches. There's something too warm and free, and—well—yes—fierce, running in her blood for the trivial task any longer to satisfy. She'll perform it possibly more faithfully, more generously, more devotedly than her maiden aunt, but it will bore the younger woman, as it never did her elder. Yes!—there's a violence in the emotions of the young woman now-a-days; a demand that never troubled her grandmother. If it did the lady had inherited her spaciousness of outlook, and probably became a maker

of history or a marrer. In those easier days that sort of thing was bred only amidst grand airs. Now we find it in villas. That's what makes the crucial difference. To be good, in short, has grown as big a grind, as subtle a puzzle for the average homely woman, as it has always been for women born in the purple, and for all men. The bit jerks at her mouth now, as it has always been jerking at ours, and we've the benefit of ancestral experiences which she lacks. While the current girl is having her character shaped and fitted—and, after all, she doesn't get it thrown in with a white dress on her coming-out night—nor is it a usual wedding gift, with all the impatience of growth in her, she can't have altogether a rosy time of it, nor can the man who undertakes to help her with the fitting, expect to come off scot free.

"Platitudes all, no doubt," sighed John, "but they somehow crop up directly clerical life takes the field. The meanness, the ugliness, the dullness inseparable from the active doing of good of the clerical life, must fall heavy upon the modern woman. How far do you propose to let this inevitable fact influence your future?" said he, his voice like a pistol shot.

"Not at all," said George, simply. "How could I? Besides, not one of you quite knows Joan. If I wanted to turn back, with her beside me, I couldn't. She is not the woman to whom you could offer the second best, with the best within your grasp. All I have to give I give to Joan just as much as I give it to God. Any man who lives with Joan *must* be half a Pagan. Joan is natural in everything, so of course she's as full of natural desires as any other pretty young woman. She *is* pretty," said he, with a proud, boyish laugh. "You must see she is, and she feels things with extraordinary strength. We shouldn't exactly have chosen Aiken, either of us, but if I did violence to the best in both of us, funking this obvious duty, it would have a disastrous effect upon Joan. She'd say very little in either case. Now her power of silence is like a draught of wine—I can conceive of circumstances in which it might become a draught of gall."

"In either case you are, indeed, blessed," said John Hilary, fervently.

"This present wild dissipation is a temptation after all,

into which we've thrust our heads, both of us," continued George. "The reaction will wring our withers, but the work there won't lack either spur or incentive—and the evenings will always be our own."

The Bishop's impatience melted to wistfulness as he looked at the lights pricking up in George's face.

"I feel as though I had an unfailing spring of good things in me," said George. "All the flattery I get here might dry it up. Then where should either of us be?"

"You have good sporting blood in your veins," said the Bishop promptly. "You'll enjoy fighting, and with a woman who knows when and how to hold her tongue, a man can do anything. It's not for you I'm afraid."

George frowned in his quick, sensitive way. "I'm bound to Aiken." There was a hint of protest in his voice. "I promised Abel. I know I can do my work."

"The gift of poetry will always gild *your* horizon," said the Bishop drily.

"The sublime and gorgeous selfishness of a poetic saint whose wife has the gift of silence is a thing not to be approached by a mere Bishop," thought John Hilary sadly. "It's an exquisite temptation to any man, that lovely gift of silence. What man, born of woman, could withstand it? I'd better leave it all to God and the awful hand of Time. It's not for me even to counsel him not to feed that unfortunate girl on cheese. I can only hope that Robert, in the chivalry of twenty-eight, has exaggerated in this regard. I'll make a last effort, however, and pass on to curates. I see he means to crucify her also in that connection."

"Let me strongly advise you, George, against total abstinence," said the Bishop in his most practical voice. "Take good Scotch whiskey regularly yourself, and give your wife port."

George laughed with devastating blitheness. "She wouldn't take it."

"That would depend entirely upon how you offered it to her," said John sharply. "She is a woman singularly open to reason."

George looked surprised. "I've been noticing how very little wine women do take now-a-days."

"They have the stimulation of new frocks and a con-

stant succession of wide-awake idle men to amuse 'em," snapped the Bishop. "In giving this advice, I'm in no sort of way tampering with the tillage of the Lord's vineyard."

"There are so many stimulants."

"There are. You're chock full of them, of one sort or another. However, fling my suggestion on the heap with the other platitudes."

"Your suggestion throws up Joan in quite a new light. That in which she's stood hitherto has been—been incomparable."

"A little sound port, properly applied, won't dim the translucence of any light, I'll have you to know; and will throw nothing out of focus. The weak spot that will undo you for a season isn't connected apparently with overindulgence of the Burning Problem of the Church. What about the curate question? Have you faced *that*?"

The glory fled from George's face.

"Now for a touch of his human quality," thought the Bishop, sitting up briskly.

"It's very difficult to decide," said George, with hesitation. "Your one desire in a parish like Aiken is to form a harmonious stimulating circle for yourself——"

"How do things there now stand?"

"We've got a good home-spun man, with a weakness about the knees, and a melodramatic gift, which he's using to the immense advantage of a nest of slums. He grates like ashes upon your teeth."

"And he'll be the death of Mrs. George, honest man! Never mind, stick to him. It's a burning and a searing question, that of curates," proceeded the Bishop dreamily. "The fly in many a pot of very precious ointment. I've never faced an ordination yet, but I'd have gone back with thankfulness to the day of small things when I did minor chores upon those occasions, swept up the episcopal hearth, so to speak. When I was a younger man the peace and joy in the Laying On of hands became often, by reason of curates, a chastening rod; and formed an almost insuperable barrier between me and the Higher Aids, but I hope," said John Hilary meekly, "that to some extent I have overcome this stubborn resistance of the flesh to exterior influences."

"I have never ordained any man of whose intrinsic worth I have not been firmly convinced. I have not spared myself in striving to do each man justice, but God forgive me, for many years of my life it went very hard with me to ordain some of the men I have ordained. God may have chosen the good and faithful servant; I have never had any doubt in my own mind but that He did, but there's never any knowing where man won't plank him down. If this poor fellow suits the place, keep him. It's not your harmony he's got to promote; your soul to cater for. The spiritual palate of the public is peculiar, but it's due a big voice in the matter."

"You are absolutely right," said George. "His dramatic gift is nevertheless astonishingly wearing."

"Don't I know it? It's a feature of the modern curate of a certain type. It's difficult, in some cases, to take the view of St. Peter—who after all was primitive man—and fit it comfortably to the squeamish and cultured stomach of the twentieth century. It's a dispensation that searches the reins, but one that's got to be faced and accepted. I have often wondered if the growth of the Higher Education of women may not help us in the future in this matter. In considering the curates that have passed through my hands, I have often speculated as to the type of women, who having had the misfortune to bear a certain order of child, should involve others in it by urging the unfortunate half-baked young person into a Church sighing for perfection. It's invariably the woman, I find, who does the family weeding."

"In this," suggested George modestly, humouring the mood ecclesiastical, "the hockey-stick girl might come in useful."

"I doubt it. The indifferent wielding of a hockey-stick seems unfortunately frequently to interfere with the efficient handling of a baby. However—that's neither here nor there."

"This weird, humorous religion of the man now under discussion is a deep-seated sign of the times produced by some need of the times. The unpleasing necessity has—I have no doubt whatsoever—that it has been of the Church's making—most necessary social atrocities have been—and it's but fair our withers should wring for it."

The other day a zealous layman came to me in regard to a young curate who gives weekly discourses to the youths in a big town parish.

"The Vicar has dropped into a sleep so sweet and sound that the Episcopal staff, howsoever actively applied, has hitherto failed to rouse him from it. And in this matter," said John Hilary, with unction, "I do not think that I have fallen short. My lay friend came armed with proofs. The addresses were undoubtedly a soul-saddening farrago of wit and wisdom, perilously hovering upon the brink of blasphemy yet keeping always, as by a miracle, to the hither side of the precipice. My heart bled for artistic England, but it *was* wit and it *was* wisdom. It was, moreover, I might almost say, glorified by a sincerity that could appeal to the heart even of a hooligan, by a love so burning, pure, and lavish that it must pierce and warm even *his* hide-bound soul. Behind all the vulgar grotesquenesses one could see the tears in that young man's soul, and the people felt them.

"I went down into the lanes and mews of that abominable neighbourhood; there was healthy growth in the faces of the dreadful youth of the place, and a gleam of the happiness for which Christ died and the Church has laboured for so many sad centuries. Drunkenness, vice, loafing had diminished in an amazing way. I found likewise the expert opinion of the Salvation Army to be in our favour. With a tearful, exasperated, flattering benediction they had delivered up the district to Waghorn and gone farther afield. I dined later with the Vicar and his curate. He was a young man in regard to whom you have to wrestle with the Lord, not once, but many times, and yet when the Vicar wakes up elsewhere, I'll see that Waghorn steps into his shoes. Stick to your man if he's fitted to his hole, George. What about the others?"

"Two are dull, but suited to the locality. They are faithful workers, with an extraordinary flow of even spirits, and are past masters in apt and pregnant anecdote. Their minds are of the Oiled Feather variety." The Bishop nodded approval. "They are restful in sick rooms," pursued George, "and old women delight in them."

"Keep them," said John Hilary, with a wry face. "The others?" he inquired sympathetically.

"They could be trained."

"Then let some one else train them! Your back isn't broad enough for that last brace. Get one man to leaven the mass so as to save it from itself, and the last choose for your own sake—if you can find him. Even our Lord permitted Himself St. John. In the dark places of the earth a man, more especially a poet, needs the help of another man to mop some of the squalor from off his soul. We can't chasten and conquer ourselves back into the arid righteousness of Judaism. It's easy to overstrain any situation. There's a cancerous tendency even in religion, and a good deal of the woman in priest, poet and man. Have any of the young men wives?"

"None, thank goodness!"

"Directly they acquire them, send them flying. The young ladies likely to be chosen by the first three of your coadjutors would be but a brutal and unnecessary millstone around Mrs. George's neck, and warding them off *you* would put her to much anxiety and inconvenience. The man of culture will have his hands full, as will also the three Leaflet Curates. Your own familiar friend will be too busy hero-worshipping to go wife-hunting."

The Bishop looked at his watch and sprang to his feet. "Jacob will have to whip up his cattle or I'll never get my sleeves right," cried he in a panic, flinging his gaunt length down the stairs. "Before you're *on* the Bench, George, make your wife acquire the knack of these sleeves—inserting a spring in them cunningly or—or a hat pin—so that they hang at the first shot. I know one man's wife who does it. To an outsider it's her one virtue. But her husband rises up daily and calls her blessed. Dear me! I'm sorry for Jacob. Haste unbefitting the Episcopal state is abhorrent to his soul. One bars being a perennial source of trial to one's faithful coachman."

That evening when the Bishop came to the flat, George was out, and Joan sprang to meet him, a dozen questions in her eyes.

When he perceived what she was after, the primal impulse of John Hillary was to throw on all his episcopal robes and stand at attention.

The strivings of Theodosia had permanently unmanned

the nerves of the Bishop, but beneath them slumbered his courage, to awaken without fail to the urgent occasion.

Suddenly he threw off his rags of office, and dropped into his own chair.

"George is—disastrously, sickeningly, sadly and most divinely right throughout, my dear," said he, his face touched with a thousand kindnesses.

"Oh!" said Joan slowly, holding her hands together. "How delightfully you put it."

By a sort of reflex action, the Bishop primmed his mouth and awaited the girl's next move.

"Oh! If only you were *our* Bishop."

"Even in that case George would still be right."

"Ah! But about the curates?"

"We've been running through them," said he sorrowfully, "three are inevitable."

"You haven't seen them," she murmured, striving for resignation.

"Haven't I? I've seen them in their thousands! There are limits to human endurance, however, George will get two new ones."

"Oh! thank you. Thank you most awfully."

"My dear, wait until you behold them in the flesh."

"They must—they simply must be an improvement. At least *you'll* come to stay with us."

"Why naturally." Joan was flushing oddly. The Bishop's whole face threw out nervous enquiry.

"In—in the midst of things I'll be able to tell you just how—things—curates and all strike me. It will," she explained hurriedly, "be rather like making confession and then one can start fair again."

"But——?" What was a man to say after all? He held his peace.

"I couldn't interrupt George, you know," she pursued. "It would be impossible."

"Oh!"

"It would spoil his swing," she explained. "George is so different from me. He has no need to be always lifting himself above the poor—and the other things—by shutting his eyes and ears and nose to nearly everything, and making the rest amuse him. He wouldn't understand at once. Getting at it would worry him immensely."

"In ten years," said John Hilary steadily, "George will take a humorous view of many things and let them drop by the way, which now he carries upon a galled and jaded back to the foot of the Throne."

"In ten years! In ten years!" she murmured under her breath, breathlessly.

"Women are kittle cattle," thought poor John, "and neither years nor the Episcopacy do much towards elucidating them for you."

"When grinning inside you—alone—becomes a habit, it seems," said Joan, "to—it seems rather to—to savour of Satan, don't you think? And yet it does get over a lot of things."

"It does," said the Bishop. "It's a snare that has often tripped me up. I'll come down to Aiken when I can, and we'll laugh aloud together, you and I, and clear the air. And remember that when a young man is in the very act of running a race he has but little time for wholesome levity," he went on gravely. "Bringing his body into subjection, moreover, must inevitably crush many things best left to sprout and spread. But in the end they'll be all the better for the pruning, and—you'll have watered every root, don't forget that."

"At what cost," he thought, strangling a sigh. "'Suffer all things, lest we should hinder the Gospel of Christ,'" he murmured.

"The sacerdotal habit will crop up," he mused in silence, "but were I to quote it aloud now, it would be quoting to deaf ears. An odd shifting of things to be sure. She's *living* the religion which one day she will surely *feel*. Generally it's the other way about, but this, to the carnal mind, is the more attractive method. It's the least feminine, any way, and that's always soothing."

"'It were better for me to die than that any man should make my glorying vain.'" This he did quote aloud.

Joan nodded, her face brightening.

"Go on," she said.

"George is right, and as George's wife you also are right."

"Thirty years ago I also was running this race; had I had such as you beside me I might have won the prize."

'Know ye not that they which run in a race, run all, but one receiveth the prize.' I, however, am now a Bishop, and George will be the poet I might have been. Aurelius tells us that a man must stand erect, not be kept erect by others, but he didn't mention poets. George and I are of those who require buttressing. But George will reach his aim.

"He may starve her," he told himself, "body, soul, and spirit, but his aim he'll reach, and any way she's not being starved for an illusion, poor child. Let me recommend you," he gently said, "to accustom your palate to unattractive food, and to get into the habit of eating *anything*—for it's all you'll get." They both looked square at each other, and both laughed merrily. "For the rest," said John, "I can't advise you, and you're quite capable of doing your own thinking. But if ever you want me, send, and I'll come."

Presently he found himself quoting in the very teeth of Piccadilly traffic,

" 'Human, yet something which can ne'er
Grow sad and wise.' "

"That's how she might be. As it is the betting is that she may grow sad without the wisdom. She's a poor little thing. One would like to save her from living cheek by jowl with 'The smouldering infelicity' of man. She hasn't the constitution for sordid tragedy; if she gets desperate, she'll get very desperate indeed. And yet it's all for the good of her soul, no doubt. How interfering we are!"

"Ah! my dear Bishop!" screamed an admirer into his astonished ear, "I see what you're at, thinking out the sermon that's presently to delight us. I can see it welling up in you."

"Indeed, dear lady, were I to permit it to well over, so to speak, 'tis a sermon that would considerably astonish you."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE elopement of his enchanting, if erring mother had robbed Captain Heron of much. Amongst other pleasant things it had taken with it some of the careless lordliness of the young man's youth, and all its exuberant audacity. It left him, however, simple and courteous in his ways and with woman, no matter what her degree, no matter whether of wise function or orgy, in which she played her part, he was always grave and modest.

Woman, through his little mother, had become to him a delicate subject, and he treated her delicately.

To be tried early in the fining pot of affliction gives vogue to a man. Rob had been made the object of manifold temptations, and being peculiarly protected had acquired an eminently re-assuring presence amongst women.

Joan's trust and confidence in him was supreme, and to be worshipped, served and amused, seemed to her as natural a part of this wonderful life, as much her right as the equal companionship of George's superb patronesses. The paradise wherein she stood was from everlasting apparently, and that she well became it, she took for granted. It is not to be supposed, however, that anything wonderful had grown up in Joan; she was, indeed, neither startling nor supreme, and not the least wise. There was the same quaint, gentle, old-fashioned wifeliness about her that had first surprised and arrested both Heron and Fred Thryng, the same unstudied frankness, the same sweet, quick ways, but the enchantment of this moving life had untied the hands of all her faculties, and her tongue had learnt a new wit, her brain a new receptivity; her heart a quickness to feel strange griefs; her voice had

lost the sharp touch of Spring in it; there was the youth of the whole world in her laughter.

To try experiments upon capacity to enjoy so illimitable as Joan's, became an enthralling excitement for her guide into the ways of the new life, and Captain Heron fairly heaped joys upon the girl.

Her cry the first time she tasted whitebait faded before her mute intoxication in her first opera, and they were both blotted out before her thrilling, throbbing, subdued ecstasy in George as a great Preacher—the saint of the moment.

In three weeks Joan had become partially articulate. She had charm now and sweetness, but her strength lay still upon the knees of the gods waiting for another turn of the great wheel.

At home, doing her duties and detesting them, she had known her weakness and had often scorned herself as a coward, but here she had forgotten the feeling of cowardice. Now to be afraid seemed an impossible thing.

It was Heron one evening, oddly enough, who reminded her that once she had been afraid in a dumb vague way, afraid of her own fears, also that the unutterable sensation might return.

It was a first night at a great theatre, and they were waiting in a cool corridor for the next act.

"If one could only carry this back with one," she said suddenly, looking round at the brilliant groups of the Select alone admitted into this sanctum. "The stir, the movement in all the surroundings, the extraordinary aliveness in their quiet faces. You can *see* the things they're thinking. Look at that man's mouth. It's frightful, but just do look at the corners, they're twisted up with a dozen delightful and terrifying things."

"They are, by Jove! He'll give Clows fits to-morrow for that last act."

"He deserves it," said Joan intolerantly. "The acting was false and bombastic and the actor guessed it. His voice cracked once like a tin kettle. That man there who's going to judge him may be malicious, but he won't scatter his malice foolishly. I—I'd like him to see George's poems. I'd—I'd rather like him to report one of George's sermons."

Heron chuckled.

"Reporting sermons isn't in his line exactly, but I believe he might possibly sit still under one of George's."

"He'd sit still and remember every word of it. He might twist his mouth a little perhaps where George—went over his head, and probably at the same moment went wrong," she added serenely, "but he's one of the things I want to carry away. Oh! who's that other talking to him?"

"The man who wrote the play with Clows. They'll have their knives in one another directly. They always allow five seconds first to the amenities—ha! now they're at it."

"Oh! But they do it beautifully, splendidly. They don't notice the gashes, they're each so delighted with the science of them. And they're quite sincere."

"Now," she cried, "oh! now two women are coming in. I know one." Joan leaned nearer to whisper. "She came to see George. She didn't make one single mistake about anything. Something George said made her repeat one of the sonnets, every word right. Her eyes were wet and her voice was a wonder. It made a song in my ears for the rest of the day."

"She's thought to be the proudest woman in London and the most reticent," observed the mentor.

"She's simple and magnificent," said Joan grandly; "it's the pride of gods. Naturally she would be proud. She's never in all her life been afraid of anything, and she knows that never under any circumstances could she be afraid—I'd rather know that than anything else in the whole wide world."

"You do know it."

"Oh! no, I don't. Do you think I'd deny the possession of a kingly thing like that? I'll tell you I did think I was absorbing this sort of courage—that it was coming—but as the time draws near my confidence seems to be going off."

She flushed to her eyes, leaned nearer to the brilliant group before them, and changed the subject.

"Oh, listen, do! They're speaking of one of George's sonnets." She paused to drink in praise of the New Man frank and generous—criticism likewise frank and trenchant,

but hardly less generous. "Dear me," she sighed, "and George is talking to a lady who doesn't in the least matter. She went to sleep yesterday all through Mr. Balfour's speech."

"He has a sedative way with him and you can't expect a poor lady with three daughters, all bones and intellect, to marry off, not to yield to a dulcet voice and a gift of re-assurance."

"She wanted to go asleep on Tuesday during Tristan and Isolde only one of her daughters kept poking her! But she really enjoys talking to George."

"She's eminently correct, and George is the vogue in a good circle."

"It's not that in the least and you know it's not. Oh, the low-toned good-humour of it all and the delicious snap in the air. They have the power of knowing the right, these people."

"Even if they don't always do it?" said he.

She nodded with unruffled charity, her eyes falling upon the critic and his victim. "Oh! they use polished weapons and they do nothing badly. And they fight like gentlemen. They're the only people I ever looked at—they and the Bishop and you more or less—who have the slightest right to judge George. And just think of the creatures who will be sitting on shabby judgment seats all around him just in exactly ten days. You remember Mrs. Worrall? There are others to match. I could never be a coward here. It's the little things that rob you of all your courage."

"I shouldn't put Mrs. Worrall among the little things."

"You would, if your mind was attuned to the right key."

"What else besides that handful of people and the alive-ness do you want to carry back with you?"

She looked eagerly around. "The joy and the diamonds and the power of overcoming under their breath."

He uttered a prolonged "Oh." "They can yield upon occasion," he hazarded, "with the same graceful and restrained sense of humour."

"Their temptations," said Joan, with wistful sympathy, "must be so large—so spacious and breezy."

"Well, they *are* pretty big," he admitted modestly.

"By the way, you must remember that you've met only the best of the town. We're the proud possessors of a fairly big second best, amongst whom you'll find quite as much sordidness and want of comprehension as even a factory town can supply.

"But one couldn't think of it here," she protested, "it wouldn't get into you and stay, with faces like that man's there, for instance, to divert your attention. He looks like a mixture of Molkte and George."

"There's a good deal of Molkte in him, and some of George."

"What are you doing?"

"Asking him to supper. See how well I can aim," said he, the twisted piece of paper he launched landing fair at the feet of the distinguished man.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" cried Joan. "How delightful, but if only one could bring him back, and keep him on tap in the cellar?"

"But we couldn't let him go. Do you want to rob us of all our heaven?"

"You have so much."

"Have we? I'm not so sure. Not more than we want anyway, nor as much. We want George, for example."

"Yes," she said proudly, "I can see that. And it makes the littlenesses of—of—the other things just twice as small. Do you know I've never thanked you for what you've done for us, for George and me," her face warm and radiant was turned to his. He could see her breast heaving with quick breaths. "Oh! let me," she said softly, "I *must* thank you, thank you, above all for showing us this. I want to tell you that it's all as much to George as it is to me. George could grow—grow—drunken on it if he let himself, and giving it all up is awful for him. He doesn't speak of it, of course. It's no use. We can't have it. Giving up the other things was awful too—I know now by this that it must have been. Hunting, you know, and fishing, and all the pleasures that take time and money. I thought once he didn't really mind—as we should—you and I, but I wronged George greatly and so did you. It's his face and his splendid pride—at least," she said hopefully, "I hope *that* does come in. It makes it finer, don't you think? and more interesting and understandable.

George really is the biggest thing I've come across—even here—you know you've given me the opportunity of comparing him—another thing to thank you for!—and George beats them all. I think it's partly George's size that makes me such a coward at heart," she added dreamily.

"Ah! they're going back. And now the last act," she cried, her dream at an end, her eyes like stars. "And then the drive in the twinkling lights, and the supper and Molke! And you to thank for every bit of it." When they sat down she put her hand on his arm and affectionately squeezed it.

Then she clasped her hands together and the stage swallowed her.

But Heron sat immovable and cold, for a strange thing had happened to him. In one moment, with no apparent will of his own he found himself plunged into a new life. He was ready to give everything he possessed to get away from a girl who yet, in a hair's breath of time, had become the one and only being in this mortal life whom he ached to hold, for ever, near him.

He sat dumb, and dull; stared at the actors, and thought of his neighbour's wife, of her dove's eyes, and behind them turbulence. He thought of her gentle womanliness, the petulant revolt underlying it, of her peaceful presence, her fiery heart, her strivings after perfect wifehood, her failure to attain unto it. Her warm, wistful longings for the delights of her kind; her passionately controlled enjoyment of them; her absolutely ungrudging yet frankly unwilling devotion to duty. Her strength, her weakness, her perfection, her incompleteness. He thought of the chaos of anomalies that ran riot in Joan and yet brought forth peace.

And then the pathetic youth of the creature seized him and the long, long years in which this youth must wither and grow old, of the tired wings that must be for ever beating against iron bars, but beating a deal harder against the unchastened distaste of a wild heart for bars so right and necessary.

Rob saw Aiken precisely as Joan saw it, and understood all her fears.

"Oh! Where can you be?" she whispered reproach-

fully. "You're miles away. You've missed *that*. I can't explain now. Do pick up the threads. It's worth all the rest. Look at George's face, and see if it's not. Until this minute George has been disappointed."

Rob stared at her bidding and lugubriously beheld the towering heights of George. He felt stifled and a pigmy and knew that George's wife had frequently felt the same. Even the saintly selfishness of the man seemed so colossal that it took his breath away.

All his thoughts ran shuddering back to Joan. She was beautiful with the scented innocent beauty of home, which fine thing never having come his way he had always longed for—and another anomaly—she was like his mother. This endowed her with possibilities outside the domestic hearth most regal and passionate, that but emphasized her power to reign thereupon. The golden web of anomalies in which he wrapped her made Joan irresistible.

She was the one living woman he could make happy; who could bring happiness to him—alter everything for him; yet made to reflect the sunshine of the whole world she was to grow cold at Aiken, to fight under the shadow of a saint for her own, poor little soul.

He could make her forget her love, and could give her everything.

All the things he had grown indifferent to assumed all at once a new significance. The old turretted house that would be his, spoilt by the disgrace his mother had brought to it, once more stood proudly out upon its wooded hill. The noted Italian garden the other man had poisoned, he now thought would just suit *her*. The peaceful, stately atmosphere of an ancestral home would be her proper setting. The nurture of clean and grateful tenants her delight. She could grow good day by day, beautifully; in that other place she might also grow good. But oh! the difference!

"They're the first people I've really met on the stage," cried her happy voice, as they went down the steps after George, caught and held by an inexorable admirer. "One could live with them, see them every day, and enjoy it. And they do evil in a really delightful way. It's not acting, it's living. "Oh! I'm glad I've seen it. And—and—why you're bored!"

"I'm nothing of the kind. But I require a walk before I can go into dramatic criticism with so fresh an enthusiast. Here, George! take your wife, and I'll be there nearly as soon as you are."

The walk did him good. All through supper he delivered Joan up to her Molkte hero, and as a nerve- tonic himself took George. The next day he spent in devising a new bit for cavalry and making good resolutions. But he knew in spite of them that once loving Joan there was nothing to do but to keep on loving her and to love her always, never less, but more.

There is a sense of triumph in the beginnings of an honest man's true love, be it lawful or unlawful; an exaltation, silent and sacramental, that lifts it high above the dust of reality. This is the royal garment of love and can be used as a purple pall one day when the lover enters at last into the cold, bleak kingdom of his renunciation.

But in the beginnings of love a man will only scent sweet incense and behold hope.

In the morning, bathed in dews, a great forbidden passion knows neither pain nor burning. Anguish grows with the heat and burthen of the day, and with the going down of the sun comes despair.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JOAN awoke early the next morning, and in the clear, cool, probing light of the dawn it seemed to her that in an odd, vague way, she had been disloyal to George. She had betrayed far too plainly her oblique, stubborn distaste for George's life to Captain Heron.

The Bishop had been another thing altogether. To speak to him had been like saying one's prayers aloud.

There was no reason whatsoever in saying one's prayers aloud to Captain Heron.

She called to mind a look uncommonly like compassion upon that young man's speaking countenance she had lately noticed whenever the mention of Aiken cropped up.

So Joan firmly set her mouth, and all her cruel, rampant, young pride was up in arms.

"Those women who wear their jewels with a perfect poise, their courage and their humour like a star, who go magnificently all the day, needn't monopolise everything," said she to herself. She, too, had her rights, and she would make a try at wielding them. So at breakfast she plunged gaily into the discussion of Aiken, and afterwards whenever the hateful name made the room stuffy, a look of quite radiant acquiescence spread steadily, and, considering all things, with an astonishing air of spontaneity upon her changeful face. Her merry laugh healed in her husband many a strange pain and warded off many a panic.

The reticence and delicacy in Joan's tribute of helpfulness was of inestimable value to George in those dark days. This commentless breaking of her box of alabaster upon his tired feet seemed to him too beautiful, too holy for words. His gratitude shone in all his ways. His smile was an unsanctimonious benediction.

To Heron the girl was an insoluble and enchanting enigma, full of exasperation and hidden incense.

For, in spite of her pride and her courage, he caught glimpses behind the cool sweetness of her eyes of odd flashes, in no sort of way connected with the clerical life.

Joan at this period was rather a terror to herself.

"I manage it *here*, finely," she reflected, "but *there*, with little Jasper to think of, supposing I lose the way."

When, in fact, she did get home, she was gay and brilliant with sublime memories, but she eluded the researches of Jasper major, and Beatrice found that she had no longer to deal with a novice.

"George," reflected the squire, "would be George in London or out of it. Has living in a suburb of Heaven, so to speak, taught his poor little devil of a wife untimely wisdom? Has she plumbed the hollowness of the world in six weeks?"

Billy, with the wisdom of the simple, knew better. He fell into the way of appearing at odd times with a saddled horse and carrying Joan off for a ride, and, filling what he knew in his bones to be a distracted mind, with healing horse-lore.

George, meanwhile, who *must* be pressing forward, had gone to perch in his bare Vicarage with one maid, who contracted an indigestion from the pervading hideousness

of all things, and "anything," which was her master's invariable order for meals.

Joan had not seen the new vicarage; the old, for sanitary reasons, having been found impossible.

"In this, the sanitary arrangements are perfect," wrote George, "so set your mind at rest about the boy. I'm overflowing with ideas. Beloved! if only you were here."

The details Joan received from Jane in a succession of ill-spelt and ear-piercing wails.

One day Beatrice made a tumultuous entrance upon Joan, in her hands a letter, full of notes of admiration, the strokes an inch above their t's, the dots anywhere.

"You're as close as a ferret, Joan," she screamed, "and George, between poetry and the Spirit—but, oh! don't let us talk of George! Of course, I knew that he was a ripping success in town, but you—why you were a hit—a real, down-right, flat-footed hit on your own account; and I, thinking you'd just do, just be sweet and amiable, be just right, in short, for George's wife. That aggravating Billy, it seems, spotted you long ago, knew it always, if you please, and refused to be astonished."

"Billy is never lavish with *his* emotions. He prefers to admire the force and vigour of *yours*," said Joan with serenity, fixing a pile of plates in their basket.

"Weren't *you* surprised, then? Had you *no* fears?"

Beatrice plumped down upon an upturned basket.

"I hadn't any fears for George, of course, and I hadn't any time to think of myself. It was all too delightful. Besides, you can't have fears in a place where you get right through everything."

Beatrice stared.

"A crowd of unexceptionable admirers at your heels; women who came to patronise remaining to be charmed." With another stare of doubt and astonishment, Beatrice referred to her letter, "The scent of the Country, the sense of the town, the pride of seven devils. Good gracious! And as for Captain Heron——"

"He was our host, in a way——"

"The innocent game, Joan, is played out. If this," Bee flourished her scored sheet, "if this is true, you know as well as I that had you been a mere good, young wife he'd have given you Earl's Court, and luncheons."

Beatrice flounced up, caught Joan's shoulders, and searched her face. "Did you care for it all horribly?"

Joan laughed, flushed, and looked non-committal. But in Beatrice's frank, bold eyes there was something she had never before seen there. Suddenly she laughed and replied to it.

"I did care for it all—horribly, and so did George."

"George! He'd have been just as capable of cutting your throat."

"He did, all the same."

Beatrice narrowed her eyes, and looked down from her stalwart altitude of five feet ten.

"He might care in a modulated, chastened, superfine way."

"He cared in the other way, but he overcame it."

"George isn't a dispensation to be argued about."

Beatrice surged round for a space, and by way of helping, hustled many a thing askew, then fetched up beside Joan now carefully packing her best cups.

Everything she laid her hand on seemed to straighten and fall into its place, there was a gentle, quick perfection in all her movements, and yet under it an odd ardour.

"Oh! you've grown years in three months. You must have put days into every minute."

"There was so little time, and so much to get into it."

Beatrice shifted her chair so as to stare with more ease to herself.

"There's a queer streak of humility about you with all your satanic pride. I wonder if a girl who could ever in all her life feel humble like that, could ever properly enjoy herself—her own dear, darling self, I mean; her own importance, her own power to make laws and enforce them, and break those already made, if she wanted to. You needn't look like Lucifer let loose—I wonder if you could possibly take that sort of interest in yourself. A glorious, absorbing interest that grows quite intoxicating at crises when you're not quite sure where they'll land you. It's a sort of lovely, diabolical possession. I can't imagine you in the throes of it.

Joan's eyes were innocently fixed upon two cover-dishes.

"How can one either assert or deny in the face of so settled an air of conviction," she asked.

Beatrice jumped up and coolly turned Joan's face to the light.

It sparkled and rippled and glowed like jewels.

"Good gracious! You haven't missed a thing, not even *that*. To leave everything with the tide at flood! To be hovering on the verge of being the newest beauty, and to drop meekly into a bottomless pit of curates! I'd rend Heaven with my cries. *You* pack egg-shell china without turning a hair!"

"You forget George."

"I forget nothing, but George least of all."

"Shall I ever get done!" sighed Joan.

Beatrice surged up, marched tempestuously through chaos, and showered a tempest of kisses upon her sister-in-law.

"The goodness of a saint," she whispered, "makes you gnash your teeth. The goodness of a sinner makes you want to howl."

"Don't do that," pleaded Joan, tremulously. "It would be so odd in you, and I'm rather tired just now for startling innovations."

"You—you reserve your confidences, it seems, for the men of the family," said Beatrice presently, in an offended voice. "Billy talks of nothing else but the pathos of taking the boy to that hole."

"I never said a word to Billy."

"Billy's not the fool he looks. Anyway, you're artful enough with me, and worse with George. His great calm soul grows calmer, it seems, in the contemplation of what gives Billy and my father fits, Joan!" she cried, in a sudden outburst of real feeling, "don't hide things from me. I know, I know. Longing for a little baby of your own tells you a lot about the pain of mothers. And that quaking Cora with two—bouncers."

"Beatrice," cried Joan, laughing, with wet eyes, "but your waist?"

"I wouldn't mind a permanent twenty-five inch waist, not in the least," she protested heroically, "when even the torture a child brings with it can turn Billy eloquent, and my father sober."

"If Billy saw you now!" said Joan softly, "I don't think he'd want for eloquence."

"Then I'd probably horse-whip Billy."

—“Is there a little bit of silence full of pain, I wonder, in every woman?” said Joan, tenderly touching her.

“If you once start speculating about the fiendish silences laying waste the world, you’ll never get through Aiken alive. You upset one horribly. You make one—sloppy. No wonder you keep men’s thoughts hovering about you. It makes them interesting to themselves in a nice way—sort of sanctifies them. There’s a lot of artifice about you—even now I’ve done all the emotion. You haven’t told me a thing, not one single thing.”

“Oh! there’s Billy in the hall.”

“As though Billy mattered.” By some inexplicable impulse, however, Bee fished out a glass from her pocket and roughed up her fringe, and when Billy came in, she was smiling.

CHAPTER XXVII.

“WHEN a truthful woman takes to lying,” said Jasper, storming up and down the room, “Sapphira may hide her head.”

“There I wholly disagree with you,” responded Miss Rebecca, looking up temperately from an absorbed study of her tablets. “Sapphira had an oriental facility denied to Joan, a constitution adapted to lies, and a congenial husband. Where have you been?”

“Oh! prowling round that abomination of desolation—Aiken. George is amazing, no bilking that fact. You’d think a man who can manage a parcel of curates in the masterly way he does would know, at least, a little of women.”

“I can myself see but little resemblance between Joan and a curate.”

“Sex.”

“Curates are of both sexes.”

“I also have in this regard permitted myself a little hope and much charity,” sighed Jasper—“There’s that fatal war-horse look about George. He smells blood. You can hear him champ the bit. He’ll be tossing his mane next. Before you can say knife he’ll be possessed by a horrible joy. We lunched to-day on tinned rabbit and the latter

end of a Dutch cheese. George appeared to extract a brutal satisfaction from both. He was, I was thankful to see, a bit off colour on his return from London. But George can go down to Hell and up again before you can turn round. What will be the upshot when the girl is fairly soused into this pit of George's brewing?"

"A break down with some originality in it, I fancy."

"No room for originality in these affairs. Chronic invalidism or a man. I wonder if Heron will have the sense to keep out of her life."

"There's no room for Heron in Joan's life, George fills it," said the lady haughtily.

"He may be blundering into her reputation then, and suggesting sermons to the curates."

"No evil seemingly without its resultant good. The sermons will tingle with a larger life than that which now possesses them. Supposing, Jasper, you go to meet Joan. She went to see three widows, and she'll come back by the pine wood."

"The roses and the pines know a hanged lot more of Joan than we do," said Jasper jealously.

"So long as she turns to the pines and the roses we may well be satisfied."

"Or to Aiken's willow-bordered canal," said Jasper bitterly. "Even a father-in-law might be a pleasanter outlet than that."

With his handsome head wagging, the Squire strode off. But his wrath gathered, and the sense of his own desolation burned in his heart.

The unquenchable youth within him mocked and derided its own thwarted efforts after vicarious satisfaction, yet the necessity put upon him to cut off even the pale consolation thus nefariously attained tore at his vitals. In spite of Isabella and a spoilt life, he had—there was no denying it—with extraneous assistance Jasper had enjoyed himself in his own way, and he was no such churl as to scorn an old and trusty friend. Whiskey was an excellent substitute for a multitude of better things.

And now, on the top of this calamitous cutting off, that there should come the more poignant one of his son's young wife's affairs. Just at the moment, too, when he had got into the way of sauntering back at her side amongst the old

green lanes and flowery bye ways of life, and picking up again, as though it were yesterday, old scents and sights and sounds he had almost forgotten.

George's very disqualifications, his flights into airs too keen for mortal man, had their advantages in this connection, in the increase of his own significance in regard to the lower reaches of a most agreeable world. "I can, at least," he reflected meekly, "foster the lesser things in the girl, the sweet, small, fragrant things that escape the observation of a saint in his first rapture. When he tones down," sighed Jasper, "he'd thank me, and we could have watched the child grow together, Joan and I." It was his last chance, too, to watch the growth of his own flesh and blood, for Isabella had taken precious good care in the early days to cut him out of that part.

And the boy for whom he had planted the pines, he thought remorsefully, as he looked down at his stalwart plantations, must now, by his own damned folly, never walk with him amongst them.

The boy for whom he was breeding his hunters, he thought again, peering through the belt of trees that flanked the colts' paddock, he must never teach to ride. His own fault to be sure, but it was none the better for that. With his sins tumbling about his ears now also came Rebecca with all her weight. Joys mellow and mature were still, he had reason to believe, within his grasp. Rebecca! a woman in a thousand! a very well-spring of worth—but the little daughter-in-law could give him back his youth. And the thirst for the old taste of youth upon the palate, once astir in a man still lusty with strength, nothing will quench but time, and the great occasion when even youth fails the young, and it's the old that must help and uphold.

Then, when she came at last slowly up the green arch of the grove, Joan's walk exasperated him fiercely. What had a bent head—the man she loved attained—to do with sweet and twenty?

Unwilling renunciation spoilt the air, the woods, the old mellow house in the distance his fathers had built "to be so gay with." At that moment the poor Squire would have given them all to keep the girl's youth young for her, to hold tight to the one little handful of his own youth, so dependent upon hers, now melting in his grasp. Without it

and Joan he felt with much sincerity that he'd be going very peculiarly to pieces.

"And how the deuce is a girl to keep up waning courage on tinned rabbit?" he muttered. And, by way of example, lifted himself proudly to his full height.

At sight of him, by sheer reflex action, Joan rose also to hers, and came up smiling. But her smile carried no conviction to wrathful Jasper; there was no substance in it he conceived. It carried ghostly suggestions of the fleshliness of the dread days to come. In the dim, shadowed light he beheld wrinkles furrowing the satin smoothness of her child-like face.

"I've been getting on with the good-byes," said she.

A score of cruel cynicisms trembled on the tip of the Squire's tongue, but the dregs of kindness in his evil old heart swallowed them, every one.

"We had as hanged a bad luncheon as ever I tasted," said he, with studied mildness, "and George enjoyed it! Wonderful knack of getting the best out of everything, has George. He's digging and manuring the curates now, until, I give you my word, I believe they'll sprout in time." Moved by a regal inspiration, Jasper's eyes brightened. "At the same time I noticed that tinned rabbit stuck in the throat of the slim young fellow with bandy legs. He gives you beans, by the way, by saying 'whoever did it,' every second sentence—early penury, no doubt, and Jesus College, and being Welsh, a dirty drop I daresay of dissenting blood in him. Never be too hard on a man till you inquire into his breeding. But there's promise in that fellow. It's a promise, however, that wants building up, buttressing with things outside the spirit and slums. Good food would put a glow and ardour into chaps of that order that I'm hanged if ever nature did."

In Jasper's eyes there shone now a great purpose.

"That, and George's influence, of course," he hastily interposed. "But one without the other is hopeless. Those fellows practically live at the Vicarage. Now here *you* could come in useful, and I'd be only too glad to assist you."

Joan paused to consider.

"It's so difficult with the poor. One is so terrified of defrauding *them* of their rights."

"The fellows that are ordained to chivvy the poor into decent living and dying have rights, too."

"Their first duty, somehow, seems to be to renounce them," said Joan doubtfully.

"Sacredotal rot! I've been through every slum of that parish." Joan started. "Oh! it's not for me," continued Jasper flushing, "to be judging any poor devil ignorantly. Too many of my own follies to account for without loading myself with other people's. I went over three times a week while you were away, just—ahem—to see for myself whether George was quite a born ass or not, and came home every evening feeling as though there was a washing day going on inside me. Do you want to persuade me that tinned rabbit will clear that out in order to make room for the spirit and better things. Good food, my girl, and good liquor, a wash in the merciful waters of oblivion is what you want *there*. The pleasant moisture dries off, Heaven knows, soon enough. And even Judas was permitted to cool the tip of his tongue once in a way."

"It's a very difficult subject," said Joan, with much concern. "In the company of curates I always do think of food. We often do think side by side, you and I—and yet——"

Suddenly Joan nestled up against the old man.

"Hang it all," said he, with nervous haste, "it's a difficulty to be overcome. That little more than scrapings should be got out of a breed of men who should be producing full barns is, I take it, largely the fault of the laity. A matter of inanition, physical, mental, spiritual, due in some measure, we'll hope, to the damned niggardliness of their wages. High thinking, my girl, should rise from the warm earth, not float out anyhow, from the cold mists of Heaven, and how can they nourish themselves decently," cried Jasper, in a fervour of piety, "unless we pay 'em. A contented stomach, my girl, lies at the root of all home-spun grace. Talk of crusades, if building up curates isn't one I'd be glad to know what is," murmured Jasper artfully.

"It sounds delightful," admitted Joan, "curates are clean, too, and extraordinary grateful. Here in the wood it sounds all right and reasonable. There——" she laughed, "looking at George eating anything gladly—the delicacies would stick in all our throats."

"That's a mawkish servile temptation to be overcome, and it's your business to back the curates. Teach them to emulate George's physique before they attempt any competition with his soul. Damned cheek! I call it. We must learn to walk before we can fly. As a growing boy George lived like a fighting-cock, and now he's reaping the benefit of it. What those young fellows subsisted on one hardly likes even to imagine."

She fetched up before him. "Is this good advice or the devil tempting me?" she demanded.

"It's advice sound to the core, and the devil is worlds away."

"I'm afraid he's nearer than that," sighed Joan, "and it sounds too easy."

"Duty needn't always give you fits."

"But it generally does."

"That's morbidity."

"No! It's being a lineal descendant of Lot's wife," said she dejectedly. "We needn't go home yet, let us sit here on this trunk."

Sitting, however, did not suit Joan's mood. She walked rapidly up and down before George's father now, honest man, rather weak with apprehension, and very red in the face.

"Instead of feeding the curates, my mind will be occupied in concealing from them that I'm just repeating disreputable history," said Joan, after a pause. "And, oh! the way I used to despise that image of disloyal cowardice—Lot's wife. A pillar of salt seemed too good for her." She paused for an instant. "And little Jasper—Aiken and curates and the poor and dirt are all like outrages on his babyhood. Babies should have sun and light and beauty—and merriment. Oh! but it's much better not to speak of Baby," she said, swinging round and stifling a little dry sob. "But there are other things. You'd understand better if you'd seen us in London, George and me!"

"I understand quite sufficiently without," mumbled the wretched man.

"You couldn't," she said dreamily, "and one can't explain it. It's not mean and trivial up there, as they say, it's big and wonderful and full of kindness, and George suited it. Oh! you should have seen how he suited it.

And—and, if they do break the ten Commandments worse than we do in the country, which I'll never believe, they don't break them openly in your face like the others, and they have, at least, time and leisure and good food enough for repenting. How can people possibly repent when they are being gnawed at continually by a craving for gin? It's too exacting to expect it of them, and yet you can't possibly be giving them gin instead of advice. Oh! the horrible puzzle of it. Now in London it was all easy and natural. George just slid into their hearts and brains, he did truly, and in a superb sort of way, he—he actually took possession of that beautiful crowd full of knowledge! You see, he hadn't to be labouring to these people through a fathomless stomach, getting all his beautiful thoughts mixed up with broken meat and soup-tickets. George—George to be a mere vehicle for conveying nourishment! and never having enough even of that to content any one of them. Besides, there are so many others to do that sort of thing, such hosts born for it."

Her face recalled the Squire to all the sense he could lay hands on.

"It's a horrible problem," he muttered, "who shall solve it? And—things have altered—or else it's our points of view, perhaps," he pursued, with caution. "You'll quite understand how much easier it makes things for a man to accredit all women, or those anyway that matter, with a natural gift for abstinence. To allow woman, in fact, a hand for breaking in nature that we, God help us, have never attained. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm sorry woman should ever lose this strange dexterity of hand; the loss would increase her complications, and make bad worse. Nature—believe me, is a sour jade—if you let her get the better of you—give her her head too much—" An odd look upon his pupil's face caused him now to break sharply off.

"George and little Jasper seem too big a price to pay," said Joan, "and after all, for what?"

"A preposterous price, and for what, indeed?"

The Squire felt weighed down by a very cart-load of good advice, but this is what he said.

A ripple of laughter ran over Joan's sad little face. "At the present moment," said Joan, "I'm Lot's wife. Let me say all the wrong things she only thought, to-day; by to-

morrow you'll have remembered the right exhortations, and I'll be in a better mood to hear them profitably. I must, just for once, speak the pure, abominable truth. What I want is to give nature her head, to let her go free and unshod without bit or bridle. I hate abstinence, and sacrifices, and renunciations, and the breaking in of nature. I want to take her at a gallop, and to be absolutely joyfully, splendidly, disastrously selfish."

Suddenly she threw up her head, and swept up and down with a marvellous fine swing, her eyes like lamps, her cheeks carnation, her lips in a moment grown scarlet. Jasper held his breath. The girl seemed to have come to her own in one bound.

"Oh! but you should have seen me in London, as well as George really, to understand; I was the centre of—the most delightful things, too. I had the courage of—of Goliath, and his strength. I could do anything, and say everything just exactly right."

She paused, her fingers on her lips—and slowly frowned.

"I was really, rather delightful, and I was pretty, too. I found out one day by chance that I can just be as pretty as I choose to be, and this isn't silly vanity, or odious selfish discontent either, truly it's not." Her triumphant voice had grown wistful. "It's a fair sort of self-defence—I think it is, anyway. You see, I knew that I could help George up there, I know I could—in a way that he'd simply adore in time. We could be so happy, and good George and baby and I. Between us, George's light would shine through all the world. And he—George—hasn't an idea how much he'd like it—or the enormous good he'd do. But I know. Oh! I know—I know—I wish to goodness I didn't know. Can you understand anything? especially my horridness?"

"That," said the poor sinner sadly, "I understand down to the ground."

"I wonder if you understand," she proceeded anxiously, "now, how—pretty—I could be, if—I gave way to it—you know."

She leaned nearer to look. "You must, after all, for I did give way to it when they came to stay with us—Captain Heron and Fred Thyrng."

"My poor, unfortunate child, you're as pretty precisely,

as you yourself have admitted, as you choose to be. It's a telling and disastrous gift in a woman."

"When," she rejoined, "you get amongst the duties—that ache in you, you know, you get afraid—even of the prettiness—you—in spite of you—you compose and attune yourself from inside to the needs of the poor. You get mouse-coloured—and your skirts don't seem to hang. You're all wrong to yourself, inside and out—and some day, suppose I acted accordingly? just how disappointed would you be?"

"I should be as much disappointed, my dear, as you yourself would be," said he, in a steady, grave tone that for a minute silenced her.

"Ah!" she said at last, "at least, George would never find it out. If I once began to go like that, I think I should die of mortification, and settle things once for all. How dark it is in the wood," she said, "and it's grown cold. Come back to Baby."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PROUD, cool, serene, refusing to permit itself to be touched or tainted by any offending airs foul with smut, a great mountain of saffron cloud, with purple about its knees, looked down with mercy upon Aiken, gilding all her wretchedness. The great factories were silent now of their throbbing hum of life, but the fires still burned within them, and the watchmen watched. Flames flared up from tall chimneys turning to orange and rose the lower reaches of the purples, and farther down upon the great rambling hillocks of waste, there gleamed, day and night, a riot of lesser lights. Small snakes of flame; scarlet, blue, green, opal, glided ceaselessly, tirelessly in and out the waves of blackness like shattered rainbows trembling in a dark cloud. Like a huge red pomegranate with yellow seeds, half way up the sky a great factory clock warned the weary people of the shortness of their time for rest. The dome of the sky, sheer blue out in the quiet country, was here a mystery of colour seen tremulously through a veil. Black and smirched near the earth the air as it reached Heaven had grown diaphanous, the glimmer of gems in its swathings of pellucid mist.

There was a marvel of compassionate beauty in that fine mantle of charity flung upon Aiken the night when Joan first came to live in it. And in the saffron glory of that wonderful cloud she beheld George looking from above downward at seething horrors, refined and made beautiful through the golden atmosphere cast by his own radiance. It enabled her to understand as she had never before done how George could eat cheese happily and stride, full of light, through any evil-scented blackness. It was a delightful, illuminating sort of beginning, full of pleasing prophecy, and Joan, to be sure, made the most of it.

Also just at first Jasper was well; the faithful and admiring curates, treading delicately as Agag in her footsteps, amused and interested Joan, and the evenings, when all the work was done, although she ached badly, and weakly desired bed and a really nice supper, were yet absolutely, inspiringly, satisfactory.

For George's powers grew in bounds. The book advanced beyond all the hopes even of his wife—strong, tender, sweet always, it was now touched with the divine touch of an unappeasible sorrow, an unappeasible compassion, an unappeasible hope; the crown and coping stones of all great song.

And little as George knew of Joan's aches, it was the things they brought into her transparent face which provided him with many a kingly finishing touch.

The mighty and true things that moved him now when his eyes turned to her, that made him pause, and wonder, and wince at some new confession of pain and beauty found in her little face, he took, however, to be incense wrested from the tears and bloody sweat of the groaning heart of Aiken, the magnificent reward for his own grudging, paltry act of renunciation.

George thanked God often in that he had been rightly directed and had torn himself from the flesh-pots; a prayer in good sooth echoed in many a stout heart, in the grimy desolation of the factory town.

Joan too in her own way thanked God, for in spite of the night-mare—canal, and all the smelling heats, Jasper kept well, and with George, George, and Jasper growing and gay, what did anything matter? So she subdued all her

ridiculous inclinations and did all that she found to her hand to do with a most winsome grace.

But as the Autumn drew on, and grey, clotted mists hung nightly above the slow waters of the canal, as the Vicar's wife plodded round amidst perspiring poverty, the babies, who for pity's sake she dearly loved, disturbed her greatly because of strange metallic blotched patches that began to break out upon their faces. These symptoms did not seem to alarm their mothers or the parish doctors. They were a part of Aiken it seemed, and yielded to time and faith, but they had a prophetic significance about them, and distressed Joan dreadfully. She procured powders and washes from Miss Rebecca, and charmed leave out of the worn, yet still human doctors, to apply them. The nostrums proving of no avail, Miss Rebecca herself, panoplied in all the pomp and circumstance of war, appeared on the scene, to regulate the wailing infants and defy the Profession.

But the blotches spread as the leaves fell, and the weary little heads mournfully wagged.

In spite of Joan's firm refusal to believe her own eyes, Jasper's little face now also began to grow steadily peaky, and one evening his mother found him sitting up in bed crying for "wed woses."

Without a word to George, then absorbed in some dire crisis, partly parochial, partly of the Spirit; making a bad cold of Miss Rebecca's her excuse, Joan posted off next day to see Dr. Baker.

Having completed his invention, so securing his mother's future, and done the very last things he had to do well, Dr. Baker was now quietly dying under the professional eye of Miss Rebecca.

The moment for which she had been long prepared, when the stubborn will of the young man must perforce yield to reason, having come at last, Miss Rebecca had swooped down and carried him off bodily to her best bedroom, where at least he could die decently.

"Ah!" he said gently, when he saw Joan's face, "I know what brings you—I've been expecting you these ten days. You knew from the beginning he couldn't live there permanently?"—he paused—"surely you knew?" he asked again.

"I—I tried not to; I'd got to believe he needn't go, I think."

"George hasn't noticed, of course?"

Joan made not the slightest motion either of response or denial.

He quietly watched her.

"To which of them will you give him?" at last he asked.

"I've been trying to decide. I want to bring him here."

"Naturally," he said, smiling broadly; "best place in the world for helpless infancy."

This roused Joan from her selfishness. She remembered that she hadn't even asked for the sick man.

"Oh, but you like it now?" she asked.

"Yes. I've come to that, and she has the kindest hands ever made." Being so tired and sick, he did not feel ready yet to go back to the child, so he stuck to Miss Rebecca.

"You might ask her though—why aren't you sitting down?—to give up the three o'clock draught. I'm getting a bit slack for argument myself. I like my tea still and that decoction of the devil spoils it. One of the drawbacks of this thing—this dying—is that it makes you cling, with a sort of feeble tenacity, to any enjoyment left you. You want the little usual homely things that used to please, to please still. You get jealous and niggardly about them. They've attained a new significance."

He laughed softly, but Joan's face flashed out restive wrath.

"It's surely time that *you* at least gave up renouncing things. I'll make her stop *all* the horrors."

"And spoil the whole business for the best soul that ever spent a whole life in renunciation, and rob me, too, of my last flicker of obvious humour. I'm not up to the more subtle varieties now. The afternoon abomination is all I want struck off. The others have their points."

Joan said nothing; she was moving quietly about the room making little alterations.

"You've truly put right everything that's been worrying me at intervals these three days," he said, watching her. "I've seen you in sick-rooms before this, and you have always done things like a child, now you do them like a woman. You've grown up in London. But even as a child, you

did all the things beautifully, only in another sort of way. When you haven't an inch of born nurse in you, Mrs. Winton, and find the whole thing so dull and sordid and unnecessary, how do you manage to make no mistakes?"

She paused, flushed, and hesitated.

"I'm back in the elementals," he pleaded, "and like asking questions."

"I like doing things for you. How do you know I detest—the—the usual things for the usual people? George doesn't know, nor—nor any of the others. I've always looked upon you as part of the Church, part of George in a way."

"The sexton, sidesman, doctor and pew-opener," he murmured. "Church property all!"

"Ah! you make me horrid!"

"I don't, but death makes *me* sharp. If I didn't know how lustily you *detest* and how exquisitely you *do*, I might be dying this minute with a doubt as to George's future, and your part in it. Knowing you as you are, cools the fever of all my anxieties. I hated George's marrying, of course, every man does. He sees the woman standing always between his friend and the sun. You stand just at the right angle and keep off the blinding glare."

"Oh, you don't know——"

"Don't I? But you let the minutes bother you, Mrs. George. There's more power to stifle in one minute if you give reins to fancy, believe me, than in all eternity. Take the minutes kindly and they grow luminous. You can look through their insignificance to the beyond that alone matters."

Joan stared solemnly at him.

"But I do see beyond sometimes. George's future seems to sit down on me often like a mountain."

"Good Heavens! You're out of form all round seemingly. There's a little bit of the future in every minute, but you needn't try to crowd the whole lot into it. We go on from strength to strength—unless we go to pieces—and strength is made perfect in weakness."

"Some people go on so quickly from one strength to another that you haven't time to see the weakness," said she dejectedly.

"That's iron constitution and a sublime selfishness

almost inseparable from the sense of omnipotence the constitution gives you. Weak lungs teach you a lot, but I hardly think even that makes up for what they cause you to miss. Mine have robbed me of two fine things, for example. They kept me from seeing you in diamonds that night of your first dinner-party, and they'll make me miss seeing you in a Christian state. You'd be a most soothing Christian, Mrs. George, so that I feel this last loss to be the worse of the two. I wish I could wait." He spread his thin hands out on the snowy quilt. "But by that time I'd be a scarecrow unfit for human companionship. Even now I'm thinking of taking to gloves."

"Ah!" said Joan, "you know too much of me. I wonder if I ever did arrive at the—the Christian state—if I'd—enjoy things."

"So it's generally supposed," he said dryly. "Pretending to enjoy them is quite as effective to the living, don't judge by me, I'm abnormally sharp, I tell you, and see at the other side of things; and don't drop the Pagan graces any way as you go higher."

Joan laughed, then she stood up abruptly, and looked down at him, her face strangely soft.

"Some day," he went on half smiling, "you'll be standing high up on a great hill in the teeth of a fine breeze with George, and you'll be laughing together about a time, not so very long ago after all, when you were rather a fool. A slight touch of—say pleurisy—an unexpected spiritual defeat, the trip of some well-covered sin—something unpleasant, will give George fits, and hustle all his points of view. He'll come to you naturally to help in the resorting, but it will be a new help and a new sympathy he'll be asking then, and in the surprise of it you'll have things out together, and begin to value and appraise the weaknesses in each other more fairly than you do now. A just appreciation of weakness is the one thing that makes strength more admirable, that makes love perfect. At present you're overweighting poor George, just as you're overweighting each unfortunate minute as it comes, and choking it up with all eternity. You pack all George's future into his present until the burthen would break any man's back, and he bulks larger than human in your eyes. You'll be dying of a moral indigestion, Mrs. Win-

nington, if you don't look out, and I won't be here to cure you."

"If I once began to disassociate George with greatness," said Joan, "it—oh! it would never do to divide them. It makes everything worth while."

"A lighter touch both upon George and Eternity would make things more worth while still, take my word for it," said the doctor.

"How selfish I am," said Joan abruptly, a new eagerness in her face, "I came about baby and we've drifted on to George and me, and after all this is *your* occasion, your own, we mustn't be thrusting ourselves into it."

"But it wouldn't be an occasion at all without all three of you," said he, smiling.

"I wonder—I wonder if you could ever have enjoyed things as—as much as I can," said Joan.

"I believe I could."

"I don't mean good works and scientific things. But—the usual things."

"I liked life well. I liked it better than most men, I think."

"Ah! you weren't always denying yourself then," she said, her eyes brilliant. "Your face just at that minute made me ask—you don't mind, do you? It makes me know you ever so much better."

"Go on," said he, with a low laugh.

"Had you many chances?"

"I had an unusual amount. I have relatives, you know, with plenty of this world's goods, and I have been fortunate in my friends. I have lived in pleasant company."

"You were a real success then?"

"If I may belaud myself a moment, I was rather a marked success, all round, for many years."

"And you gave it all up for your mother's sake," said Joan, with wide eyes. "And now you're dying—dying without one single word of regret or revolt. I didn't grasp it all really until this minute. I've been getting used to people dying. It's often the most comfortable thing the poor things can do. They get so tired. I've been glad sometimes when it's all done and they have no more dreadful to-morrows to face. And so many people can so easily be spared. Their death makes no difference to

any one. There is no more use for them." Her eyes looked quietly into some pit unknown to man, where some of the sorrows of women lie hidden. "Death is their natural end," she said. "It just makes more room, lets in a little more air, that's all. But to be dying when you might still be enjoying yourself! To surrender everything without a word," she cried in an unsteady voice. "Oh! I've been horrid to you. Don't try to be good and steadfast for my sake," she cried—"as an example, Dr. Baker, but please do speak out. Don't you hate it in your heart? Isn't it very hard? Isn't it horrible?" Joan's eyes were heavy with unshed tears, her lips trembled.

"It's—it's a hanged unpleasant business, my dear child. Don't let anyone persuade you it isn't, that is, if you're not too tired to care. But if in spite of your lungs, you still feel fresh and ready for a new lease of life if only you could lay hands on it, and your hope of Heaven, will, in spite of you, get mixed up with the memory of all that earth has still to offer, I tell you it becomes a deplorable grind. I doubt, however, if it's as bad as giving up liters, Jasper," said he, with beautiful kind eyes, "without a word of revolt. I doubt even if it's much worse than giving up the things that make life joyous upon the very threshold of life for the sake of a man, as you've done. The thought of you doing hated tasks in the perfect way is helping me a lot in this bitter business. I always meant to tell you, I had a letter written telling you; it's there in my drawer. Take it, if you like—but it's better to say it to your face. And I—why I have a well-spring of strength from which to draw that you have not yet touched. Oh!" he cried, "you've helped me tremendously in this sordid affair and yet, and yet—you've made me my last hell!"

"I—I——"

"You've been too busy and faithful with your violent hates and your tender loves to trouble about me," said he, with half-amused reproach in his failing voice, "or even to notice my gradual fall into folly. Sweet Mrs. George, I have loved you dearly this many a month as a Pagan. When next we meet it will be more decorous, don't you think, if I may be permitted to love you as a Christian?"

For reply the withheld tears rained down Joan's cheeks and she softly wrung her hands.

"Just another thing to give up," she cried at last, "just one more!"

"And the hardest," said he.

"You'd already so many! If only I'd known. Oh, if I'd known I might have made it easier for you."

"How?" he enquired, with sad, humorous eyes.

She laughed tremulously. "Oh!—I—I—should have been so sorry—so sorry!"

"Such sorrow is beguiling," said he, with a sorrowful laugh. "Death cancels all one's obligations to the conventions, however, and telling a woman that you love her brings back the fragrance of life to the spent air. It—it breaks the monotony of dying. It freshens everything. I don't think I shall ever feel properly tired again. Pagan to the finger-tips though you are, Mrs. George, you yet go harmoniously with the Infinities. But no man so full of bounding life, so near sinless perfection as George could find out your heroic hypocrisy. He'll have to stumble a little himself before he can understand the foolishness of women and their wisdom. You're the least disturbing of women; it may be some time before the knowledge comes to him. Now I've fixed myself in your memory let us get back to the child. With your Pagan propensities there is no doubt as to his future destination. There are wild doings up at the Hall."

"Oh! I know, but George doesn't. Don't tell him."

"Why not?"

"What could he do? It would only disturb him."

Dr. Baker jerked an impatient head.

"That might be a blessing in disguise; of sound educational value in the development of George."

"George wants all the peace this week that Aiken will leave him. He has difficult things to face."

"How can one argue with a creature that has the touch of Pan himself?" he asked. "However, after all you do owe the Squire some reparation. You came between him and what had been a blameless though somewhat laborious future, and the boy, with the audible flutter of wings about him and an upward motion, will be of more use just now than Miss Rebecca, with the clatter of the poor wings that have moulted in waiting for the Squire. And in sending the boy to that astonishing household you'll

be doing right. The only thing that could ever break you, child, would be to imagine that giving up is no longer demanded of you, no longer of any avail. It's that which brings despair to women. Neither contingency," he added dryly, "will be likely to interfere with *your* development. But sermons bore, and here have I been preaching at you this half hour. Rough that upon anyone so amazingly young, and I loving you so dearly too. The very sight of you stirs up my own youth and makes me want to be up and doing. If I'd loved you longer I might—I might have hated this even more perhaps. Don't I hear the rattle of a spoon? Which means that I must go back again to dying and the absorption of nourishment. But this last taste of life has been the sweetest I've tasted. I'll die with it still on my mouth.

"And George!" he murmured, his aching eyes closed. "Oh! some day he'll find out the price a born Pagan has to pay before she reaches the Kingdom of Christ. Some Christians are run up cheap, like jerry-built huts," he muttered; "they irritate dreadfully, those good tinsel erections, some on the contrary require to be cemented brick by brick with tears before they'll stand the stress of time and storm. These never irritate and in their end there is rejoicing. After my shameless confession you'll now often be thinking of me and this little spark of truth will filter in with me. But Christian or Pagan, go on as you're going. Do everything like a quick, sweet bird full of loving kindness, without even the most perfunctory knowledge of Church principles; and good-bye! good-bye! good-bye!"

"I wish—Oh! I wish you could stay."

"To go, unpleasant as it is, simplifies matters. That was not Miss Rebecca after all?"

"I can understand dying—thankfully," cried Joan passionately. "But how you can smile as you do in this torture of surrender it's—it's beyond me."

"Look here, Mrs. George," he cried, with sudden energy. "If ever again you dare even to think of dying **THANKFULLY**, go over, that very hour, to Miss Rebecca, and get her to feed and dose you. Promise me."

"I promise," she said absently.

"If you don't I'll—I'll haunt you. And if Jasper is ever

seriously ill, give him whiskey, brandy, anything. Preaching again! But it's because of the shortness of time. Such a lot of things are coming back too, but they're blurred and mixed up oddly with—with—unprofitable things, considering the occasion, perhaps. But if I could think very clear, I could explain. I—I might give some most excellent advice. It's no use, I can neither sort nor select. Ah, dear, kiss me. George won't mind now at the last."

"I'll come again," she whispered.

With a great effort he threw off his weakness.

"No—this is the last. This is good-bye. We've come as close, we two, George and I, as men can come—and I know things, oh! I know. George could be—as jealous as his father. Deep down George is fiercely human and nothing—no one must come between George and me. His hand must be the last I shall touch." He dropped back in the pillows, panting a little. "Besides, I utterly detest death-bed scenes. Miss Rebecca will make me none; and men, thank Heaven, can't be mawkish together. When you get very weak you can't tell what sort of pranks a mixture of love and religion won't play with you—and it might demoralise the survivor. And besides I've another Master besides love to whom I owe my last days. Go, dear, go! You make life too sweet and death too bitter."

She kissed him weeping and went, but she turned back at the door.

"I've never done anything in all my life for you. Let me do just one little thing. Jasper needn't go yet, not just yet. I'll not give him up till the day you go—then we'll be giving up together, you and I. It will be our first partnership. It won't be quite so lonely, I think, if we do this together."

His grateful, amused face said a last good-bye mutely.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FOR three eternal, silent days the thought of her odd partnership ached in Joan.

Whilst in the noise and stress of his labours; in the bray-

ing of innumerable asses in mortars all too small for them; in the multiplication of unnecessary foolish words for the conviction of invincible ignorance; in the clack and clatter of minor officialdom, to come home to look at Joan in the ordered peace of her household, restfully busy, was the one saving and sanctifying moment of George's life.

And so the silences in the dim, grey house grew daily longer, and to George more quickening, more renewing, more eloquent with fullest comprehension, fullest sympathy.

Joan, on the contrary, grew cold in these mute hours, and now as she was practically waiting beside a dying man for the hour of their mutual surrender, she had sometimes to pinch herself blue in order to keep herself from shouting aloud of all her pain and all her revolt.

The horrid temptation beset her invariably when George had fallen asleep—anywhere—upon anything nearest him—for one begrudged moment, or was joyously, proudly scribbling down an idea snatched clear-cut and clean as a gem from the midst of howling chaos.

Joan always wrestled successfully, however, with her ingrowing besetment, and George found her, as ever, a perennial benediction.

In those days, indeed, he sorely needed one.

The imminent death of his friend tore at his heart. The curates were a blistering dispensation.

The seeds of a criminal strike were festering in the clotted, breathless air of Aiken. More harrowing and absorbing than all else he was now in hot strife with Satan on behalf of a kingly soul.

When one day Joan had to rouse him from a little sleep into which he had tumbled, to tell him that Dr. Baker wanted him for the last time, she sighed with a curious relief.

"But sit down for a few minutes," she said, as he sprang up, with tumbled hair, "you can't go till the five train. You must have some tea first, and I must speak to you. I've known for several days, dear, that we couldn't keep Baby here," she began, after a pause. "It's the Autumn. You've seen how it kills the children, and the Winter is worse; the mothers say——"

"Joan!" cried George, in a low, shocked voice. "Joan!" he repeated confused and then stopped dead.

Tired, shocked, astonished, he could only look at her, a little blinded with the stirring within himself of strange pain. The ordered quietness of her face confounded him. She had altered, he dimly conceived. Her face, that was so sweet and gentle, with vivid, sparkling lights behind her eyes, was different now. Instead of the old child-like sweetness there had grown into it a wonder of kindness.

The lights behind her eyes shone still and steady, but now they seemed farther away. It was the face of a woman no longer quite young.

"And you told me nothing!" cried George at last.

"You've been so busy and so tired. And—it wouldn't have altered things. Jasper must go."

"But you?—child! you?"

"George, don't look at me like that. If I once begin to cry—and I never have cried, not once—and after all it's worse for Dr. Baker, and I don't suppose he cries——"

"But—oh! it's so different. He has earned his rest."

"Even if he has I don't think he wants to rest. He wants to live. He's enjoyed himself immensely. Oh! George, he hates dying, he told me so. I went on Tuesday to ask him if we must give up Baby—and he told me—he told me a great deal. He's taking it in anything but a—a born—saintly way. Well, he hates it so badly that—that I arranged to take Jasper to his grandfather the very day Dr. Baker dies. It's always comfortable to do horrid things together—in an understanding sort of way. It's not so lonely. And in a way it will then be one sorrow for you, not two. You've so little time for your own sorrows, poor George!" she said wistfully.

"Oh! you poor, poor little mother!" cried George heartbroken. "But, darling, you have so much to bear," he continued. "Try to think of Dick in another way. He's done splendid work, splendidly. It's been recognized in spite of his thirty years, his name will last, and every minute of those years have been full of good things. And lately he's been working against cruel, crushing odds. Surely no man has better earned the Eternal Life?"

"But he so thoroughly enjoys this life, and, George," she said, "he loves *me*."

"He what?"

George was on his feet, his face as grey as granite. "But when? Where?" he demanded incoherently, his brain afire, his heart like ice.

"He told me that last day. I had never thought of such a thing. If—I had—oh! if I had——"

"Well?"

The hardness in his tone struck some little atom in Joan dully. All the rest of her was throbbing with the pain of the two partings.

For the first time in his life George discovered that even in chastened flesh may lurk strange and discordant points of view.

"But, Joan?" The tone this time fixed Joan's wandering attention. She turned her eyes full upon her husband's face. Then slowly, and with an ineffable dignity, she stood up.

"But, George, I don't understand. I—I'm extremely proud of the love of a man like Dr. Baker. It's the only one single thing he ever did give me, and after all it's the best he had to give. And—he gave it beautifully. And—I—I can tell you nothing while you look like that."

His face made her giddy, she could quite easily have fallen. To be defending herself against George! It seemed so extraordinary. She had to hold her hands tight else they must have flown up to hide her face. She loosed them in a minute and laid one upon a chair.

The aloof, quiet, proud offence in her face was like another blow to George. His grey face flushed darkly. He turned silently to walk up and down the room.

An unaccountable dismemberment seemed to rend and twist him, a storm pitilessly to smite and beat upon him.

His face partook of his disorder. His mouth worked oddly. His eyes flamed. He was possessed with a horrid sense of undeserved outrage, he was ashamed and confounded.

And he entirely failed to understand or account for his warring emotions.

That the abominable anger surging up in him against his dying friend was the fury of fiends, not that of men, he knew; the rest was dim. He fetched up short and stood dully marvelling at his own unworthy violence.

Joan's eyes, fixed in mute enquiry upon his face, suddenly flashed out.

George's appalling likeness to his father, at his worst, explained a great deal. She remembered Jasper the elder in many a spasm of intemperate wrath.

One day, not a month ago, young Jasper, with the exasperating guile of babyhood, had consciously excited the jealousy of his adoring slave. At the time Joan remembered Isabella and shuddered.

George, too, seemed to be shaken from all self-control.

To her terrified eyes he might also be a drunkard, shattered after a debauch. George, to be disfigured into such a likeness!

She sat down and steadied herself.

"Oh! George, you must stop looking like that, please." Her tone did more for him than the wisest words. Her averted face further helped him. In an instant he knew how piteously he must have lost his head; the fever of jealousy was consumed in a hot flood of shame.

"It seems so utterly impossible. I can't simply bear it," she went on slowly. "Until the last few minutes your face has always made the most impossible things possible—except just at odd moments when I've been too tired to bother. And now to see you feeling all wrong—in rather a low way—I should imagine," she added, with a quiet disdain that made George wince, "I felt as if I—I couldn't sit up properly any longer. If the smallest atom of you were really to go, I believe the whole of me would go with it. Oh! George, I'm so brittle."

George was now broken with remorse. He was awkward now before her, sensitive, awkward, and very young.

"Oh! Joan, I've been vile, outrageous, senseless, dearest. I don't know how it all happened. But in one instant I found myself struggling in the blackest waters that I've been in yet. They swamped everything; our sorrow for the boy; Dick's dying; your goodness. I could only remember that he loved you, and you liked it! Joan! Lift up your face and look at me," cried the poor fallen saint. "I can't touch you, dear, till I see that you forgive me. You needn't be afraid to look at me now, dear," he said sadly, as she sat immovable. "I've behaved like

a fool and probably look like one; we can't escape the outward sign of any mean emotion, but I'm no longer a cad—a ravening brute."

She flung a lovely shy look at him, and with a sigh lifted her head.

"I thought I'd wait till you were absolutely right," said she. "I've noticed with myself it takes a few minutes."

"I lost my head," he said humbly. "It's so odd to come across unexpected wild beasts in yourself. The thought of your going to Dick about the boy and not to me—you know—Oh! Joan, if you were a man you'd understand better how a man may stumble into making a fool of himself in this particularly odious way. You—you're so absolutely different from other women——"

"But in London," she said wistfully, "I was rather like them."

"Their likeness to you was what made their charm," said her husband proudly.

"It's you who are different from other men," said she. "If—if you altered, if you weren't *you*, nothing would ever be the same again. Nothing would seem right."

"After this idiotic outburst?" he asked ruefully.

"But it's over. And it's shown you at least how much I do depend on you," she said, with trembling lips. "You can light all the dulness and still all the pain—except just sometimes. I depend on you altogether, you hold me up."

"This time I've been a broken reed."

"Yes," she said, frowning curiously, and stirring a little. "It was odd you could be—you—who can see God everywhere."

"Sometimes a man forgets God and can only see his wife."

"It's nice to be remembered before Higher things sometimes," said she, after a pause, "but not just in this sort of way. George," said she in a quick, sharp voice, "did the face of God ever seem dreadful to you?" But suddenly she threw up her hands. "Don't tell me," she cried, "I'd rather not know. It's all past and nothing must ever bring it back. And with Jasper gone I shall depend on you more than ever."

"Your strength is stauncher than mine, and has the

invincibility of perfect gentleness, beloved," said George. "That's perhaps why you don't realise it. It will never leave you in a moment of miserable passion and drop you like lead into the waters of weakness."

Joan drew her feet up under her chair, and every atom of her twisted in a spasm of dissent and revolt.

He looked so big and uplifted and so near to God. She felt so far from God, so small and dejected.

Should she tell him, heap some of her burthens upon his back, her own was so tired? She fetched a deep breath and a volley of hot words seemed to blister her very lips.

"If only you knew——" she began.

"As though I didn't know your reserve of strength. Isn't little Jasper tugging at it this minute?—and over-work, and this dreadful air? And Dick's dying? Do you think I've forgotten anything in all this bitter business, forgotten your goodness in sparing me till the last; forgotten your struggle before you decided to give the boy to my father and not to Miss Rebecca?"

George's face had regained its power over her; she could no more now have told him all the petty disorder of her mind than she could have struck his wonderful face.

"And, darling, that madness has left me, and Dick was my friend first after all. And I can think now from *his* point of view. I know better than you can what it must be to him to love you and say good-bye!"

"He did hate it," said she.

All the heat had turned seemingly to ice in Joan and she spoke icily. She was sorry, but it was the best she could do.

George knew everything—everything but just what she so sorely wanted him to know.

Her failure to enlighten him seemed to put between her and George all at once a confusing medley of parochial institutions, a thousand dissonant points of view, a throng of strange shuddering silences.

And in the distance a dim Heaven and a dazzling earth blocked the way to George.

"And yet to say it all out would be like—like desecrating an altar," she thought, with a long look at him.

"I wonder," said George suddenly, "I wonder—in spite of idiotic explosions—if two souls ever before clung so close as ours—two brains ever before thought so near together."

"Poor George!" said Joan, with the oddest laugh, and in a quick spasm of surprise, loneliness and remorse she caught and kissed his tender, stroking hand. "All Baby's things are packed," she added hastily. "I'll go with you as far as Hepple and change there."

"Won't you come on and see Dick, dearest?"

"No, I might make it harder and disturb him."

"It's not your usual way to disturb."

"But at such a time earthly things *must* disturb. I don't think he's ever mixed me up with heavenly ones."

George turned a loving glance upon her, but he did not repeat his invitation.

"Oh! Baby and the tea!" she cried. While George was drinking his second cup of tea she crouched down beside the child.

"Jasper!" she cooed, "we're going to grand-dad's, you and I, and you're to stay, and take care of him. And you'll see the horses and the calves and the cows, and the young colts and the red roses."

"An' you'll see 'em, too?" he demanded, her face perhaps moving him to a sudden suspicion.

"No, not for long—only just for a day; I must stay with daddy, but I'll come to see you. And a very big bit of you belongs to grand-dad. We mustn't keep it as well as our own. Greediness is dreadful, darling, especially when grand-dad's ill and no one can cure him but you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you, and no one else quite so well. It makes grand-dad well when you take his hand and insist upon his going out to see the horses, and the cows, and the flowers. Sitting still in the library or the gun-room is extremely bad for grand-dad. Oh! Baby, you've got a great deal to do."

"But I'm seepy," said Baby, nestling drowsily up against his mother. "And it's so far. If I called where we lived wid the wed woses, you could always hear; won't hear dere."

He looked so small and white; he leaned so helplessly

up against her. She held him closer and an odd little look of defiance came into her face.

George did not in the least mean to be selfish, but there was a panic-stricken look about him. His wife seeing it, controlled herself.

She softly put the child down, stood up, took her husband's cup, and brought him some more tea, but for the moment she could not touch George.

"You tum wid me to grand-dad's, mummy. San't cure him widout you," murmured Jasper. "Tisn't no use never, mummy. An' tink o' pears an' apples, an' six young cats all blind an' mewin', an' gwapes. Mummy, is your ears gone blind like the kittens eyes?"

"No, dear, I hear every word."

"An' the dwives," said Jasper minor. "You arms hold better 'n Bwook's and his chin scwapes an' he smells of beer an' peppermint."

"I'm afraid I can't stay this time, little lad."

"Mummy," said Baby, with an air of premature wisdom, "I tink you must. Bwook's is wery kind, but he's awful vulgar, he is. Bwook's says I'se a damned little warmint and a buckin' hippopotamus an'——" He paused to conjure up other memories and behold the result of the disclosures already made.

"I'm dreadfully shocked, little heart, but tell me more."

"Oh! there's lots," said Jasper cheerfully. "Let me tink."

While Jasper nerved himself to further effort George sat silent to watch his incomparable wife struggling towards victory. That her place was at Aiken and by his side George had no doubt whatsoever. It was absolutely necessary that Jones, the second curate, must rest, he had twisted his ankle badly; the Infant School mistress was ill; his own hands could hold no more. If Joan went now it would entail an entirely new adjustment of things and there was no time.

Besides, never in all his life had he more urgent need of his wife. He was himself fiercely fighting against a host of despairs, a gathering crowd of indifferences, a web of fastidious horrors. Pains, that only the contact of the best beloved could assuage.

George spared her the recital of these—he fought and

conquered them with dignity alone with his God. But afterwards to come to Joan was what made everything possible. A wounded man will go slack to his work, Joan healed his wounds and sent him out whole to his labours.

If it was necessary for her to go—then, of course, he could face the fact. But was it?

The child's face had certainly grown thin. His colour had faded. George looked anxiously at his legs and was reassured. They were sturdy and instinct with life, now as he was kissing his mother they kicked vigorously to emphasize the vastness of his affection.

The rampant abandonment in the child's movements might well compose the most fearful of fathers.

But with the intuition of a poet George knew to an unusual extent for man or saint what an imaginative mother may endure. It was Joan's first real parting with the child. His heart bled for her.

But that Joan could accept the lesser thing—could take the easier road struck George not at all. Still less that the easier road may upon occasion be the right one, for in a variety of ways George was still very young.

"He said," proceeded Jasper, 'I'se a bloomin' eel, an'll make him split his sides, an' Squorr'll give him the sack. He told 'em in his hand away from grand-dad's best ear, he did, mummy. Awful vulgar, ain't he? Tum, mummy, or me'll be saying dem awful vulgar words, me will," said Jasper wheedling.

"No, Baby, you won't because when you thought of me they'd seem to be biting your throat, and when you're not thinking of me you'll be curing grand-dad. So there won't be any time."

Her sweet, quiet face, her clinging embrace of the child, the brightness in her voice remained with George for many a day, a haunting memory.

"I'll ask the doctor if I need stay," said Joan, "and if it's not really necessary I'll come back to-night. Perhaps I'll meet you at Hepple."

Jasper gave a queer, bitter little sobbing cry, but being a brave boy he stoutly held back the tears.

"Daddy wants me most, little heart, and mother wants both of you. And mothers can do ever so many things, but they can't divide themselves in two."

"Bravo!" said George in a low voice. "Men have got decorations for smaller victories than that. Heart of my heart, we couldn't have spared you now!"

CHAPTER XXX.

ALTHOUGH her child had not been peculiarly successful in dazzling the dulness out of life for Joan, without him there seemed to be no light anywhere. So in her painstaking way she had gone forth to search diligently until she found it.

She shut her nose to the scents, her eyes to the sights, her ears to the language of the poor, and went in and out the sweltering houses. She told stories to the seething infants, beguiled their elders into suffering gladly their many tasks of sewing, listened attentively to the mothers, and gave tobacco to the old men too deaf for verbal consolation. And everything the Vicar's wife did, she did with a full understanding of the insidious yearnings of her clients, and with a real appreciation of their mighty fortitude.

And sometimes in her irresponsible way Joan was suddenly alive and alight, sheer back in the one vivid transforming holiday of her life, with George the centre of it; and conscientious in all things she would strive to turn this radiance of the past upon the monotonous dimness of the present, but in this matter the screw refused to turn in her hand.

Without visions it was difficult to get on at all, however, so in order to exorcise the worldliness from memory—to thrust the glitter of jewels out of her hankering mind, she often shut her eyes and betook herself to the more permissible sparkle of streams only to open them upon a dank wall hideous with posters.

But it was only when she looked away from George that these degenerate thoughts took any real root in his wife. In George's vivifying presence she could generally cast them out.

His vitality strung hers up to a spurious activity. There are convictions, however, with which it is impossible for a woman to argue.

"If only I could get to enjoy the affection of those poor young men," Joan sometimes mournfully reflected as she plied George's curates with nourishment, "it might be a solace, but it makes one rather tired than before. When four people all like you in the same indefinite way it becomes a drag."

She beat up eggs, however, for the ailing ones, and gave the sound tea, and pride kept her face bright.

It was only with herself she could do nothing. The passionate hostility of this foolish woman to the whole deadly routine grew in vim and volume, and night and day she longed for Jasper minor and the bright air of the woods. Even if she could have been wholly at ease as to the baby's *entourage*; she was anything but that, however, for it was a chaotic household which ecstatically welcomed her to the Hall and a bleary-eyed master.

The Squire's latest bout seemed to the untamed and adaptable mind of that gentleman to be founded upon common-sense.

He considered it in the light of a robust protest against unnecessary self-immolation involving the innocent; against the leading of lambs to the slaughter after a sneaking fashion only possible to the modern saint with radical tendencies. Even the martyrs, argued the Squire, saw their way to going to the stake unaccompanied by wives and infants. He felt deserted in his old age; even Rebecca he reflected with bitter inaccuracy, even Rebecca had twisted a solemnly worded, high-principled proposal of marriage into a suggestion fraught with levity. There was literally no refuge left him but the bottle and an invulnerable head, for which he found himself now often blasphemously thanking God. And by way of conscience-money he would despatch a double donation the very next day to George's thrice-damned schools.

Joan's belief in the heavenly influence of her boy was staunch—had she not proved it upon worse than Jasper? But the amazing versatility of her father-in-law took strange turns. Faith where he was concerned must be plentifully planted with hope; and the air of Aiken nipped all the tender young sprouts of that sensitive plant.

Jasper's secret stirrings of heart, however, because of the trust and confidence implied in Joan's preferring him

before the righteous Rebecca and that lady's critical eye upon his handling of responsibilities so unfitted to his deserts, combined with Joan's hints, tended to produce in Jasper a strenuous intolerant rectitude, an unswerving firmness of touch in his dealings with petty misdemeanours, very much to the advantage of Jasper junior. So upon many matters Joan's mind might have been at rest.

While to obey a grandson who had absorbed many of his mother's ways whilst escaping divers of his father's, soon became quite natural to the Squire. The efforts of the infant for his good chiming in melodiously with that young person's own aims, and his thoughts about his mother, were unremitting.

Rebecca, moreover, the child supplying the indispensable chaperonage, now came at frequent intervals, and with Rebecca about——

The squire left the sentence incompleted, closed his twinkling eyes, and emptied a bumper he had just prepared for himself into a pot of scarlet balsam. "Wants bucking up by the look of it," he murmured benignantly: kindly disposed, even to the vegetable kingdom, was Jasper.

The boy, in short, brought a hush and a fragrance to a jaded household, and pricked the memory of his grandsire with a thousand gentlenesses.

Thinking of the child whilst talking to Rebecca, that lady lost her wrinkles, and in the twilight she was a black-eyed girl again, with the boys of four good counties toasting her.

And when she had gone, and he sat lonely in the gathering darkness, Jasper would bitterly resent the cruel fate that had prevented Rebecca's being the grandmother of their boy.

In those forlorn moments the Squire often felt that it was time indeed he did begin to make ready his balance-sheet to lay before the last Auditor.

A difficult matter for a mind still, alas! somewhat carnal to tackle alone. A thing that needs somehow the help of a good woman.

The baby, in short, was doing all that could reasonably be expected of him; his face was round again, his cheeks as red as his roses.

And yet was his mother filled always with a strange fear.

George, however, was tortured by no such dim faithless ache.

Body, soul and spirit was he absorbed in his great fight, and the fiercer the contest the better fitted did he seem to face it. Every atom of the Vicar answered gallantly to the greatness of each need. His work prospering, his intellect expanded, and the freshness of his youth never waned.

So broken with fatigue that he could fall asleep on a door-step, yet after a rest of ten minutes he was ready to go out again with the step of a boy, and a face that could bring hope to a dungeon.

Just now a series of sermons for young men called forth all George's powers.

They had been begun modestly in his own dim barn of a Church for a knot of young fellows seething with vulgar talent, swollen with truculence and an overweening arrogant desire to "best" the clergy.

It was impossible to deal with each man separately, so having severally excited their curiosity and aroused their fighting spirit, on the plea of the shortness of time, he had induced them to let him take his innings once a week in his own pulpit.

The Vicar had a gift of rapid rejection as regarded both idea and word. What filtered through heart and brain therefore on to the fair paper was invariably the best of George, with all the frank informing charm of his absolute naturalness.

For George was at heart the least priggish of men, and only by mere accident was he ever inhuman.

The courteous respect for his opponent, inseparable from a good soldier, was the first thing that struck his amazingly thin-skinned audience simmering with hostility, together with his intimate knowledge of their every point of view. So that the echo of his sympathy and respect for every man and every opinion, so long as there was a spark of honesty in either, was soon at work amongst his hearers, undermining prejudice, allaying suspicion, disarming hate.

Then, but not till then, did George let his shafts of keen, kindly sarcasm play in and out the gaudy meretricious arguments he knew so well.

And by this time his men eager, amused, alive, were all ready to have the thing out with the parson as Man, and

could behold with reasonable serenity visions of sand in their foundations of granite, of rents in robes until now deemed immaculate.

The sequels of these sermons rarely enjoyed the peace and privacy of George's study. They were begun and continued at odd moments, in street and lane, on the banks of the fermenting canal, beside factory fires, and the desks of clerks.

But this thing once begun had to go on, and it called for all that George had to give, and at any moment he had to be prepared for the extortionate demand of some intellect, suspicious, alert, often offended, therefore as often offensive, and always as keen as a razor.

So each day George grew more thoughtful, more absorbed, with less time to think of the absence of Jasper or of the little interests of life.

Moreover, in spite of her boy away and dank weeds for roses, Joan shone above them all, a gracious star guiding upwards; through the whiteness of misery, the redness of crime, the horror of the sadness of living, she passed untouched, and there was healing in her steps. And to give George his due, it never struck him to omit the workings of human fallibilities in the course of Joan's sweet and soothing progress.

To evade and discount anything in such as Joan were an insult.

Her moments of impatience, of strong strange revolt, in no sort of way escaped this curer of souls. He saw her love for colour and light, for fine clothing and change, and the fresh airs of Heaven, the glitter of jewels, the desire for admiration, and further explorations into that riot of delight, called society. All Joan's passions were beautifully known to George; without them, to his mind, she had peradventure been an insipid saint with a lengthening nose.

At this time George was woefully beset and buffeted by an enquiring youth of atheistic tendencies, with a fiendish gift of words, an insatiable faculty for amassing incontrovertible fact, and a superbly accurate habit of deduction.

To keep up with the romping swing of this young man's revolutionary campaign added heavily to George's labours.

And now one day, in the crux of a tumultuous argument, despair had looked round the corner and palely mocked George in the face.

In one grim sword stroke this man had cut the ground from under George's feet, and left a score of steadfast trusted threads loose and bleeding in the hollow air. For the moment the Vicar could get no sure foothold anywhere. His grasp was weak as a child's.

The falter was only for a moment, but it was a moment to look fair in the face.

George resolved to snatch one hour of peace with Joan and silence, and went back, a lion refreshed, all the threads again in his hand.

But it all meant more work, more absorption. Joan saw less of him and more of the curates, and the silences gathered and grew.

Nothing in regard to George, however, escaped his wife. Her surprised admiration for him never wavered. She learned all his love, and his struggle, and the aching of his faithful heart in the words of gold she wrote down to his dictation every night when the work was done. For now she was his Secretary. But being a weak, unheroic woman, sometimes she could have wished that George would push aside her pen so as to hold her to his heart and still her pain.

Sometimes in a pause she would wonder how long ago it was since, the child in bed safe above them, she had sung comic operas with Fred Thryng, and every drop of blood in her had jiggled gaily to the measure.

Now her blood seemed to shuffle along in rather a slipshod way, and even her thoughts that used to come leaping crept now tiredly trailing.

They came always in time, however, she hastily assured herself—George quickened them. So in the evening when he wanted them they were there.

One night, for some inexplicable reason, Joan kept waking in horrid panics. It seemed to her that little Jasper was calling. She lay still and breathed softly, afraid of waking George, and that night through all her broken sleep there went the crying of the child.

Vague fears were in no sort of way things to lay upon George's over-burthened shoulders. So even when the morning brought a cheery note from Jasper senior alluding casually to a slight baby complaint, Joan said nothing, and did not mention the note.

There were moments when, to complicate George with infants and their minor complaints seemed next door to blasphemy. This was one of them.

But still the cry rang in her ears, the impulse to go to the child turned in her heart. So when the vicar came back to luncheon his wife gave him the note, and in a voice that could not disturb the most nervous of carnal hearts, much less one so peculiarly buttressed by faith as George's, she suggested that she should like to go see the boy.

George was reading absently, imperative thoughts pressing themselves into each sentence, now he jerked himself back into fuller attention.

"But, dearest—it's nothing, surely?"

"No, but I'd rather like to go. I can manage easily by hurrying. I must catch the earlier train though, it would never do to chance the later. I'll be back in the morning for breakfast."

"Oh! well dearest, go, if you are the least anxious," he said after luncheon. "I'll miss you horribly. Henty wants to come with me to Frome," he said, following her into the dark little drawing-room. "I have, as you know, to preach on that very subject we're at logger-heads about, he and I. The fellow has thrown the most amazing discord into chords that until now have always rung true. I've been at the thing now for three stricken hours and it won't come right. I can't refuse his company, that would be cowardice, but I'd joyfully be rid of it. I needn't enter fully into the difficulty to-night, but I must be quite ready for Henty afterwards. You can't face a scoffing, striving, sad soul like his with a glimmer of doubt in any argument, and as for subterfuge, it would be like defying God with Henty's big mournful eyes on you. I mean to win in the end, of course, but oh! the shortness of time. And Henty savagely triumphing in his horrible intellectuality, bitterly regretting in the depths of his curious, cruel, tender and most uncomfortable heart. I'll win—I must win—but it will cost blood. And this night of all others to be without you!"

Perhaps he had said more, but he caught that moment a glimpse into one of the secret chambers of women into which men must not enter. With a whimsical impulse to take off his shoes, George sighed and was silent. Presently,

with a half-realised idea that in some vague way he had been selfish to his wife, George laid his hand upon her head.

"Why should you come back in the morning," said he, "have a 'appy day in the country. It will do you good."

He sprawled down, and leaned his head that ached with thinking against her knee. "I sometimes think," said he, "that Henty lodges seven devils, every one of them a senior wrangler. There's so horrible an accuracy in his arguments. He's never blatantly blasphemous, and latterly the wistfulness underlying his savagery is the saddest thing I know. If I could prove this thing—convince myself first and then him, afterwards I could have courage for anything, I think. In five minutes yesterday the fellow shuffled back to chaos, the sortings and siftings of years. And in two hours they must be—to some extent—readjusted. If only," said the poet in this complication of a man, "if only you could be with me, a cloud of white work upon your knee."

A shiver ran through Joan, but she kept her voice steady.

"It's such a busy day. There's such a lot to do before the train goes, George."

"Dearest, I know. But I believe my need of you is developing into a morbid craving not to be given way to. I'll get things straight all right in the end, never fear. And if Henty's arguments prove to be as rational as I now think them, and as original, no *rechauffé* of German thought, after all it's fortunate they came up before the sermon, not after. You may eat your words upon occasion in the presence of your wife, but never under the intelligent glare of a factory hand!"

"George, supposing Henty had happened in—in Peter's parish?"

George looked at her, and his eyes danced until they were a joy to see.

"We'll leave out Peter, if you don't mind," said George.

He stood up, laughed, and shook himself.

"Oh! Joan, it's a serious moment. It's a crisis in my life, and in Henty's. Wish me good luck in the name of the Lord, child!"

He paused, and turned on the threshold. "How young you look, and as though you might be so gay. It's—in

spite of everything—it's a glorious life," he cried, "but for you—sometimes I've thought——"

Joan sprang up and went to him.

"If you thought one single bit differently about the life. If you got—usual—or lukewarm, or—or stodgy, or curatey, or the least atom like Peter, I should die. If—if I'm a beast, and can't quite enjoy several things, that—that has nothing to do with you! Oh, George, this sermon will come right, I know it will, and so will Henty.

"Henty is disappointing to look at, certainly," she admitted, "but if he's so passionately anxious to be spiritually-minded, he surely must succeed in the end, even without your passionate interest in him. Between the two, how could he possibly go near failure?"

She was diligently brushing his coat with her soft hands.

"Your very touch gives one courage—and takes the green shine off this coat," said George gratefully. "It's awful, this one, isn't it? The possession of you makes a man vain-glorious. You lighten every darkness, and bring the sparkle of the stars into the dull routine of life. You keep apathy at bay. I never come away from another man's house having beholden his wife but I'm sorry for him; she falls so horribly short of mine. We're poor, dependent creatures. You hold us in the hollow of your hands, and you're not always merciful."

George's eyes rested gaily upon her, and he laughed softly. "I once knew a fellow, a double first man, with a born talent for theatricals. He might have done anything, but his wife drove him to nightly Halma at forty, and he died with the fifteenth edition of 'Ben Hur' in his hand. So much for wives!"

"Don't worry, darling, about the boy," he called back. "If there was the smallest cause for worry they'd telegraph."

"Telegraph," she repeated to herself, shivering. "But, even if they did, George would still be thinking of Henty's soul."

"It's—it's a terrible religion!" The next instant she lifted her head proudly. "But it's magnificent!" she said aloud.

Her pride was but of short duration. It vanished in a humble admission.

"I believe I could understand this passionate zeal—every

throb of it, if George was going out to kill bodies instead of saving souls! To feel like that, and yet to be George's inspiration! It's—odd—and, and it's—rather frightening."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THAT afternoon seemed to Joan to go in bounds, and yet drag dismally. She had so much to do, and the necessity put upon her to do each thing in its order and with an air of ample leisure, tormented her wickedly.

Joan had no natural leanings towards panics, false sentiment or morbidity; she argued down her senselessnesses, each in its kind, sedulously. But the soft wail of her child in her ears broke obstinately through every tag of logic and settled coldly in her heart.

She got her Penny Bank safely through, and lest she did too little, having done much more than was strictly necessary for the parcel of derelicts committed to her care, with a feeling of inextinguishable nausea, she went in to her Mother's Meeting.

The women seemed more hot and steamy than usual. Their eyes were duller, their voices rasped with a more desolating drag, their feet shuffled with an added touch of droning monotony; the one straw too much was in everything.

And all the babies looked limp.

Joan fixed the sewing assiduously, and failing to move her mothers by word of mouth, she betook herself to reading aloud to them. She picked her subject with reference to the weird tastes of her audience, and valiantly read on. And through all the words there throbbed the crying of the child.

But the voice of "Passon's lady" to the women, who for all their dulness, had the wise ears of those who have borne children, seemed only the sweeter for the new note in it.

What Joan read troubled the women of Aiken but little at any time, though they always dearly loved her voice, but never more than upon this weary, thunderous day of Autumn. It nevertheless disturbed them.

One faded, faithful creature who never thought of her husband but she remembered a beating, and yet revered the marriage state, in a pause laid a furtive hand upon the girl's lap.

"A 'usbing," she said feelingly, "may be a blessin' in disguise, an' 'e may not, God knows. But it's wen the childer begin as we larn. It's they as put the bitter in all our drink. Your little un's 'ad to go, mum, they tells me. Wot wi' the teethin' an' the convulsions an' them there creeturs in the water, not to spake o' brown creeturs an' watered brains. A plenty sure in children to try the faith an' the temper. An' afore you've fairly finished wi' this 'ere lot hup come Satan an' the pits 'e lays.

"'Tis thankful," she proceeded dreamily, "we should be for our benefits, for sure. An old maid be but a barren gye—a passil o' crool waste, she be, God 'elp 'er—an' a likely man rarer every year, God 'elp us.

"But childer"—she paused to groan softly—"they set us prayin', the childer do."

Joan knowing that she meant kindly, pressed her gnarled hand, but the comfort had stricken chill.

She got, however, through her tasks triumphantly, had time to change all her things so as to be fresh and fragrant for Jasper, and ready for tea when George burst in.

"You're back!" cried he, "how lucky!"

His face was white, his eyes sunken in his head, but they gloriously shone.

He looked as one who has fared through a dreadful vigil of the night to find joy in the morning.

"I've had the very devil——" he laughed—"well, I've had a rank bad time of it then, but I've got square again. I know now where I stand. I see light everywhere, and words are fairly pelting into me. I'll convince Henty and wiser than Henty. But I can't let one single idea, one thought go—they're not written down yet. And you must help me—child, how white you look. Are you so tired?"

"I'm not tired—but——"

"You're tired to the bone, dearest," sighed George. "Can't I see? But it must make no difference, dear, we know that, you and I. You know Hinde is dying, and he's sent. He can't stand any one of the curates but Jones, and he's gone, you know. He adores *you*, however—

more, I think, than he does me, and it's the man who has the whole of life before him, not him who has just reached home, whom to-day I must serve. Will you go, dear, to him and explain? He'll understand. The dying are often wise, and we've talked together of Henty, he and I. Oh! he'll understand all right. I'll be with him, of course, at the last. It's not so urgent as that."

"But George——" she stopped abruptly, and steadied herself.

George's eyes were upon her, tender, remorseful. How white she was, how tired—her sweet white face tugged at his heart. But he stood like a runner ready for the race, one foot lifted, his proud, eager head towards the door. Minutes were hours to him.

"He's forgotten," thought Joan, "forgotten baby—and the time, and the train——"

The haunting cry was in her ears again. She daren't wait or she must refuse George.

"I'll go," said she. "I'll go at once." But lest he should kiss her, she moved aside.

George had meant to kiss her, but with the exquisite rightness of his wife palpitating in a man's soul, what after all are kisses? and here was a great race to be won.

A woman cannot hurry a dying man, so Joan lost her train.

The shuttle-cock of two rival companies, as one train crawled into the station, her mocking sister dashed gaily out. It was twelve good miles to the Hall. Joan thought frantically of telegraphing.

But it was an evil road banned by the Squire, who loved his horses. The message would terrify the conservative old household. Above all it would imply a want of trust in George's father. She could explain her presence and her ridiculous fears, but it seemed a mean sort of cruelty to set a beloved old man, with strong feelings, off upon a good three hours' unnecessary blasphemy. Besides, how could she sit still and wait, for the child's crying rent her brain?

There was one fly available. The horse seemed skittish and the driver looked askance at the weather. But Joan coaxed him and he obeyed.

The roads were rough, and the going slow, and when they were five miles out upon a bleak common, the storm broke.

By this time Joan knew for a certainty that her driver was most obstinately and unpleasantly drunk. She had expected as much from the beginning, but rustic manners are often misleading.

Moreover, the potatoes of Mr. Stokes being but recent, and his normal powers of resistance to the insidious advances of strong waters considerable, it had taken the keen air and a panic fully to betray him.

In spite of her sustained effort after the sterner virtues, Joan was hampered by many of the foolish fears of her small, dead mother.

To be out alone, at any time, in the dark, was torture to Joan, and a thunder-storm, even in the day-time, a terror.

But now in the outermost darkness, with a scared horse and a driver in a still more disturbing condition, her heart stood still.

Chains of horrid fire ravened across the sky. A lurid radiance of orange and scarlet danced devilishly in her eyes. Freakish, iridescent zigzags of deathly flame went fleeing across the common, through the black branches of a blasted oak crashed a thunder-bolt.

Hitherto hereditary reverence for the "Sqweere's darter-in-law" had restrained the use of "bloodies" in direct conversation upon the part of Mr. Stokes. In the slackness of mortal dread they flowed freely.

Joan shuddered and held tight to a strap.

"A evenly night vur a——wild goose chase, this 'ere——an' no turnin' neither tìll we reach the crass," yelled Jonathan.

All Joan's minor terrors were swallowed in the one great one.

"To turn back now!" she thought frantically, "and only six miles from baby."

With her voice raised so as to pierce through the howling elements and two drunken ears, she artfully observed:

"How lucky that we've got over the worst of the road.

It would have been terrible on that hill above the station. I—I think it's getting lighter," she faltered mendaciously.

"Think it's a-gettin' lighter, she ses, ses she," sneered Jonathan, debauched by drink and terror into a rank Republican. "An' the—adjective—'evens a droppin' hout their innards."

His voice seemed the most cruel thing in the crash of elements, and in a mighty flash she saw, all at once, a spice of danger in the dishevelled creature.

"Gettin' lighter?" he roared, flinging his whip-hand aloft towards the belching sky.

Joan shrieked a re-assuring reference to the Squire's kitchen.

"Sqweere's kitchen be damned! An' me a soppin' to the pelt. Wi' the —— double newmony this 'ere —— spring. Can a turn safe enuff be the —— crass an' turn I will, s'elp me."

Joan peered into his distorted visage. It was the face of a man who at any moment might hit out. Soft words in such a case were vain, and she had now the courage of a mother bereft.

She brought her mouth close to his horrible, drenched ears and through the trumpet of her joined hands shrieked:

"Don't dare to turn. Drive on at once, as fast as you can, or I'll take the reins and drive myself. And—you know the Squire, you must surely know also what you'll get from him if you presume to disobey me."

For full five minutes Jonathan, shocked into mechanical obedience, drove with stertorous breaths. Then his dull mind began to creak again upon its rusty hinges. He thought of the slimness of the creature who dared thus to defy him; the terror that he had seen plain enough with his two eyes upon her puny face. "A shakin' like a jelly," he murmured, with a side glance at this freak he carried. Her unhorsey appearance, backed by a constitutional contempt for women, filled him with surly, mortified wrath.

"What do 'er know o' 'osses," he reflected, "tain't the build." He paused in a nervous spasm of old associations. He had in his time bent head and back before more than one hard-bitten nose, in a habit, with a tough whip-hand. Another look re-assured him. "Tent the build," he re-

peated aloud, "noways," and in the wide sweep beside the horse pond, recurring to his original intention, half mechanically he jerked at the mare's mouth.

The half-formed intention to turn, with a blinding flash in her eyes, confused the ill-trained brute, driving her back upon her haunches, and in a second they were floundering in a wet ditch into which the pond, when over full, drained.

The insensate howlings of Jonathan completed the mare's demoralisation; whereupon he began to lash out wildly with his whip.

A lioness now, robbed of her whelps, Joan seized reins and whip, crushed the brute's hat over his eyes, thus stilling his yelpings, and, how she managed it, who could tell, but in the end she got horse and freight up the bank on to the open road. Joan had little practice and less skill, but a soft voice and kind hands go far with man or beast.

But one wheel was on its last legs, and the mare dead lame.

Jonathan, drenched, maudlin and semi-repentant, crouched by the wayside to await death, meanwhile jerking out imprecations, with points of piety, in each.

No remonstrances could reach the creature through the storm and Joan was at her wits' end. She wondered if she could ride the mare and leave the wretch to his abominable devotions, but she found the brute wincing with the pain of her knees cut to pieces. She drew horse and fly as near as she could to Jonathan, and proceeded to poke up that gentleman, now fervently requesting God to break the teeth of his enemies, for Jonathan was pious-bred and knew the Scriptures—anon supplicating Him to bless his father and mother, long since laid in their graves.

The voice of command, touching at last some old brain centre, Jonathan scrambled to his tottering toes and meekly bobbed.

"Since any moment may be your last," said Mrs. George imperiously, "hadn't you better try to die sober? Straighten yourself at once and attend to me. This horse must be put somewhere. Is there any place near?"

Jonathan shook himself. "A cottage—'ark a' that, oh Gawd! oh Gawd! Swish!—see—that. Gawd Amighty! be nigh us! A cottage—ses 'er—It's main 'ard," he whined,

and in a painful effort to stoop to look at the knees, he sprawled at Joan's feet.

"Instantly get up," she cried. "Is there a cottage anywhere? Yes or No?"

As a last resource, hoping to arouse some familiar memory, Joan kicked him.

The heroism in the action as applied by woman to man, went straight home to Jonathan.

He hitched himself up, limb by limb, and with a new humility stared at the bit o' whiteness in drenched muslin, who serenely surveyed him.

"Hup that 'ere field be a cottage," he ventured, "me haunt it be as owns it."

"That's fortunate then, she'll know what to do with *you*."

Unsteadily he freed the gig from the traces. "Hup—hup," he shouted, and determining to be even with some one, he grabbed the whip out of Joan's hand and slashed cruelly at the quivering, terrified brute, but strung now to desperation Joan had no fear. She wrenched the whip out of Jonathan's hand and struck *him* with all her strength.

"Go on in front," she cried, "and lead the way, and don't forget that I have the whip."

Jonathan was no sooner inside his aunt's door than he collapsed in a whimpering smother of foul language.

"Sqweere's darter-in-law," wailed the old woman, "s'elp us. An' drink wicious he does, does Jonathan, sense he wor breeched, an' afore it. Lard! Oh, Lard!"

But at last Joan brought her to coherence, got the mare to shelter, and finding there was no candle in the hovel, much less a lantern, she stood by the fire for a minute to gather up her courage for the dark road. But in the security of light and warmth, sheltered from the blinding storm what lay between her and her boy, her fears grew so vast and unsurmountable that Joan daren't delay.

She said a hasty good-night to the old woman, promised help for damage done, and was away again into the darkness before the crone, dulled with ague, could protest. Her shrinking presages of woe followed Joan however, far up under the sodden arch of trees, another note of horror in the hideous discord.

The young moon was lost now in the thick sky; the unfettered winds fled howling one from the strokes of the other. There was a dense wood above the cottage, rent branches whirled through the air, and the thunder rolled and the dome of the Heavens was scarred with horrid flame. Up in the trees a host of birds twittered fearfully.

It was an awful night within four homely walls. A night to give pause to every sinful soul.

To think of what it really was alone in the open must have undone Joan, so she just thought of each footstep as it came and plodded on.

Head and hands thrust forward, she groped through the woodland stretches, and in the clear spaces tried to run, but now her knee that she had twisted in the confusion of her souse in the pond, began to ache and hampered her.

By the old woman's clock it had been ten o'clock. It could now be no more than eleven, and yet she had surely travelled for centuries.

Suddenly upon a slight rise in the road, she was fetched up by a horrid consciousness that she had lost her way, that cold terror of travellers from which there is no escaping. In the pause another terror seized and held her. A swarm of grisly things rose up all at once from the earth and closed in above and about her. They beat her upon face and neck and hands with slimy wings. They caught at her shivering flesh with curious claws, they possessed her and would not let her go. To turn back was to fall sheer amongst them, to go forward to get farther out of the road.

And through a pause in the storm the child's cry came wailing.

Suddenly in a flash of blue light, she saw the white arms of a cross and with an odd childish gesture, beating off the Things with her hands, she limped towards it.

And in the lurid light deciphered signs upon the bleached arms.

She had laboured three miles out of her road and was still eight miles from the boy.

And then Joan sat down and cried bitterly.

This was, however, folly, so she lifted herself up and stumbled back the way she had come.

She wished tiredly that she could pray, but as she forged doggedly on, she could only think of Jasper and the Things, always pursuing.

And then with a gasp she felt herself falling over the edge of the world.

The sweeping rains had broken down the great bank upon which the road was built, and Joan found herself jammed fast in a pit, inextricably bound and imprisoned by a heavy fall of mud and shingle.

A dreadful numbed, confused longing to lie still and let things go seized upon Joan, but an ingrained habit of self-sacrifice is always useful to a woman. She restrained her feeble desire to dally, and with all her strength shouted for help.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JOAN might have cried till morning, however, had not Captain Heron found himself very peculiarly bored at a dinner-party that same evening and left early.

He had indeed fallen lately into rather an unhealthy habit of lightly getting bored, of even faintly resenting the harmless and necessary flow of polite conversation.

With the reputation of his mother growing daily in enchanting audacity, social chatter held pitfalls. He had found more than once a hush at his approach. And since even a spotless woman may be irretrievably ruined in one angelic smile, what may not happen to a be-spotted one?

He had found, moreover, that little Mrs. George Winington once having entered into a man, was a difficult person to get rid of, so as there really was no good and sufficient reason for ousting so sweet and delicate a visitor she remained with him, so making other women unabsorbing. Moreover, as the notoriety of his mother in the unhappy woman's despair rose to screaming point, the thought of that other woman so like, and so unlike, oddly enough, became as a soft hand upon a raw wound.

George Winington, in throwing in his lot with Aiken, had not been forgotten by the County. He belonged to it, and the veil of poetry half obscuring his common sense, kept up a nervous interest in him. One could never tell

what he might not do next. He had already got into several highly respectable papers, and once in the papers God only knows! And Joan came in by the way.

It was to hear about Mrs. George Winnington that, indeed, had suggested to Heron to accept Lady Rose's invitation. He had heard in the course of the evening a good deal of the fitness of Mrs. George Winnington for her high calling, and a little about the muddiness of one of her skirts and the dead wall that closed in the Vicarage; and then Mrs. Mercer, who had borne children and done excellently by all of them, in the act of peeling a peach, having first given her views upon vaccination and the unseemliness of the New Gallery, related how little Mrs. George, finding that her child could no longer stand the fœtid airs of Aiken, had taken him—of all places in the world—to the Hall.

Women often surprised Captain Heron, and as he remembered, with a curious awe, how passionately Mrs. Winnington loved her child, he stared at the Bishop's helpmeet and wondered exceedingly.

He was still wondering, in an unlearned, mannish sort of way, when an hour later a woman's voice broke through his meditations. These being of an unprofitable nature may somewhat have demoralised Heron. He was certainly less calm and cool than usual. Instead of sensibly permitting his soldier servant to explore the drenching blackness, with a queer catch in his throat he jumped himself out of the dog-cart, and by the light of one of the carriage lamps went floundering through the deep mud towards the slope whence came the cry.

The strangest thing in the evening's experience was that he felt not the slightest surprise when he saw Joan in the ditch. It seemed to him that he had fully expected to see her.

"I felt pretty sure it was you," said he in so matter-of-fact a tone that his coming became, in a moment, also quite natural to Joan.

It was the least melodramatic of meetings!

"Are you hurt?" said he

"Just a little—my knee. But I can't move—there's some sort of a mountain on me, I think."

Heron reserved his enquiries and went to work. And

there did indeed prove to be the better part of a ditch upon Joan. She was in dire distress else she could hardly be in this plight, that he knew, and yet, in spite of the knowledge, in spite of hour and place and storm, in spite of reason and righteousness, with the maddening selfishness of a great love upon him, Heron, as he freed her from mud and shingle, seized with every touch an eternal moment of bliss.

"I'm not the least surprised," he said, his joy despite all effort mounting to his voice. "I've been expecting to meet you somewhere to-night."

Then he remembered a great deal and changed his tone.

"Where on earth were you going?"

They both laughed and that broke the spell.

Joan's laugh breaking off into a tremble made him, however, blink oddly.

"I heard this morning that my baby wasn't very well," she said; "nothing really—but—but I got frightened. I had to come. I hoped to catch the first train, but I didn't—you know those trains. I found a fly at the station, but the driver was drunk, and out on the common the storm was dreadful. Trying to turn we had an accident, smashed the fly, and hurt the horse. I had to walk on."

"I see," he said dryly. "I'll have you at the Hall in half-an-hour. But—George?"

"George doesn't know. He has gone to Hepple."

"But you heard in the morning?"

"The letter said really very little, and George was terribly busy. I didn't let him see it."

"I see."

"You see quite wrongly," she promptly replied. "In no sort of way is it George's fault."

He was busy getting as much mud as he could off her skirt.

"I don't suppose for a moment it was. When he finds how the expedition has turned out he'll be nevertheless terribly put about, and probably be thinking that it was."

"No," she said quietly. "He will not. You can't blame yourself for what you know to be right. He'll be dreadfully distressed, of course, but where a big thing's

involved, one must take big risks, and one can't begin to whimper directly they come."

She said nothing more, and was passive in his hands. As a rule so self-helpful that she often made things rather difficult for a man, she now yielded silently to his every touch and permitted him almost to lift her into the dog-cart.

When he got in beside her she was shaking from head to foot.

"Do you think you've caught cold?" he asked anxiously, wrapping her round more warmly.

"No, but I'm just finding out how awful it's been. I'm so glad it was you who came. The one thing I could remember was not to stop for one minute calling out. If I had, oh! if I had, and you'd passed by!"

"I shouldn't have passed by. I should have known, and come."

She looked up at his face, clear and distinct in the moonlight pouring through the riven blackness, and all the things she had seen upon the face of the dying man she saw now writ plain upon that of the living. But, oh, the difference!

Yet somehow it all seemed just as natural, as much part of the whole thing, as that he should have come to her that night. She was shocked, and sorry to her heart, but she felt richer, more proud, and just a little warmer. It seemed to her that she had been given something that only the best of a woman can buy, a gift that could in no sort of way shake her confidence in a friend.

To give all she could in return must be the next step. For to take all, and give nothing had never been Joan's way.

But there seemingly were difficulties afoot and a new pain was stinging all the old ones into life. She saw Heron flush under her grave, attentive eyes. So she sat still, looking straight ahead of her in order to let the new, strange sorrow settle down quietly, and to wonder what her part in this perplexing matter would be.

The wind had fallen now and the thunder muttered and growled in the far distance and the driving rain had ceased. It was no longer necessary to shout each word aloud.

And yet neither spoke.

Heron was wondering dumbly how far he had gone in folly, how much she knew, and how she would judge him.

She was, he knew, singularly innocent in her points of view, singularly lenient in her judgment and not easily shocked, and she had a fine power of selection. He had known her to face truths steadily that a more learned woman had passed by. In a natural state there was no morbid sentiment about Mrs. George; a quiet fearlessness that had often surprised him, had always distinguished her. But who could answer for an overworked woman? He felt a horrid compunction; a confused sense of having stumbled into waters too deep for him, having also drawn in, perhaps, a less stout swimmer than himself.

They were silent both until he had driven in through the wide gates. Then at last she leaned closer to him and laid her hand so quietly upon his arm that not the most vigilant of grooms could be any the wiser.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I don't think any words could ever tell you how sorry I am for you. I have thought always that the very saddest thing that could ever happen to woman or man was to love one who can never give anything back—but a miserable substitute. It is the one supreme misfortune. It means every pain that's ever been suffered."

"But you—what do you know?"

"Oh! but I know! I've thought it out often, I've been so sorry for people. I've been so thankful that that at least could never happen to George and me. It's been an immense consolation—often. Oh! I'm sorry, sorry for you. *I'm* only the gainer. It's an honour to be loved in the only way you could love," she said softly. "You're the best man, except George, I've ever known."

"Don't—for God's sake——"

"You're better than you have any idea of," she gently interrupted. "You're better than the Bishop, in a way. No Theodosia living would spoil the best in you, the greatest. You being a soldier she'd probably make it greater in the end. *You* couldn't hide a talent under any lace pocket-handkerchief." Heron drove on doggedly, his face like stone.

"Look at me," she pleaded, "we must have this thing out together."

"What do you propose?" he asked harshly.

"What a voice!—and things already so hard." Her own voice was faint and very tired.

In spite of heroism Heron looked tenderly down into her face and somehow it gave him strength. There was an afflicting womanliness in Joan.

"To ignore or evade or pass by what you mean—what we both know—brings a commonness into this thing," she pleaded. "It dishonours us—don't you think? There's never been anything common in you. If there had been you would never think of offering it to me. So why should we pretend? I want your love and your friendship and your help—to-night more than ever before in all my life—I want it as I've never wanted anything. To-night no one could help me as you could. Not George—nor George's father—nor Rebecca—nor the Bishop even. You're the one friend I want. By right, of course, you ought to go away alone, and get things right again—into shape again, but I can't spare you—and you won't even look at me."

And with that he looked.

"Mrs. Winnington, you don't quite grasp *my* point of view."

"But I do. If I didn't how could I make this big demand on you? I should sit up straight and hope sincerely that you'd be gone before I came down in the morning. But I want you to stay to help me."

"But how?" said he in answer to her compelling face.

For a minute she said nothing, then she clutched his arm.

"I wonder if any woman could ever tell any man how much she loves her baby or in just the sort of way—I can't tell you how I know—but I do know—that mine is worse than anyone suspects. I believe that he will die. It's not foolishness—I've known, in a way, all day. And if—if Aiken has killed—him—and—and—things——" She held his arm more tightly, her face was marble white, her eyes full of uncontrollable fear. "Sometimes I'm afraid of myself. If—everything got suddenly uprooted I might do some foolish thing. Being foolish yourself should accustom *you* to folly. I think you'd understand—you'd

know what to do for folly. Someday you must come to live our life with us—then you'd perfectly understand how I feel."

"I understand now. I'll do the best I can, and any way there's no reason to spare *me*."

She peered up in his face. "That's it partly, but to-night there's more—I'm asking a big thing of you, but you care for me in a foolish sort of way, and I'm not very wise—I've grown afraid of despair and," she cried out sharply, "I didn't think I'd have had to protest so much!"

"You break a man's heart with the things you don't say, and yet you expect him to be ready with common words. Of course, I'll stay with you and stand by you."

"But," she presently said, "I've been extraordinarily frank, I've said out all the things upon which I should have been silent, and yet you imply that I'm keeping things back. You can't explain just how you feel about your baby—and George—George, too, is difficult. But you have great understanding, surely you can see—I'm not morbid or exaggerated really in my heart, but to-night I'm tired? Find things out by your own—folly—please, then you'll get to the folly in me, I think."

"See," she said quietly, "there are lights moving in the house. Ah! I knew. I'm glad you came."

Heron, as he lifted her down, made a supreme effort to forget himself, and to his credit, be it said, he partially succeeded.

Until eight o'clock the boy had been practically well. His cold had seemingly vanished. He was a little paler than usual, he chattered a little less; but no one, not even Rebecca, who had never let him out of her sight that day—and where Jasper minor was concerned Miss Western was a very well-spring of alarms—had any fears.

Having seen her own mixture swallowed, and that of the doctor reserved until the child's absolute recovery should render it innocuous, with an assured mind, she had gone home.

But at eight, an odd, swift weakness fell upon the child. He sank tiredly back, after drinking his milk, and began to cry softly for his mother. Whereupon there raged chaos in Thryng.

There was little need for Joan to make excuses for her

sudden presence. The household at sight of her of one accord thanked God.

Joan submitted passively to the kindly, trembling women grown grey in the Squire's service, who flocked around her, brought her to a great fire, unfastened her drenched garments, chafed her numbed limbs, wrapped her in soft warm clothing, and gave her hot wine to drink. And then she hurried to go to her child.

"Now we'll get along," said the Squire, waiting for her outside the door.

He had been extracting all he could from Heron, and had his own opinion as to what was withheld.

He was consumed with wrath against George, with anguish for the child, and fears for the mother. But when he saw her face as it stooped over the child, to combat her hopelessness seemed the one hope left him.

"Where are the doctors?" Joan asked, looking round. "He must have brandy at once. Dr. Baker, you know, said so, he said he had a strange constitution."

"The vagaries of a dying consumptive are fundamentally untrustworthy," said Jasper, in nervous haste, while they waited for the doctors. "They'll be judging other constitutions by their own. 'Tis of his own soul a man should be thinking at such a moment, he's got past doctors. Those men we have know what they're about. That child is not the constitution to want nips."

But Joan asked and received permission to give brandy. Some condition of the lung had so far forbidden the use of stimulant, so the doctors said, but now it could do no harm. When she turned again the old man's face hurt her greatly. Why should she add her despair to his?

"I daresay Dr. Baker may have been wrong, perhaps, in a measure, about baby," she said, "but I've a sort of idea that he knew most things."

"Ought to have known better than to foist off his morbid moribund imaginings upon you then."

"Jasper has always been like me in the little things. Only for the wine they gave me just now, I shouldn't be able to stand up."

"I have nothing to say about the stimulant, my girl, only for God's sake rid your mind of a poor dying man's wanderings about the little lad's constitution. "And——" he

paused, flushing, "faith, my dear, and prayer, and all that sort of thing, you know, mean a lot, I think, when given by a mother."

Her quietness was driving the Squire to distraction.

She laughed softly up in the face bent over her. The saddest little laugh in the world.

"I'm afraid he'll have to be content with what *love* can do for him. I've got nothing else left, but it's the greatest of the three after all, isn't it? See! The brandy is doing him good already. His eyes are opening! His lips are redder! and he's a little warmer. Don't you think he's a little warmer? Just a little tiny atom?"

It was true, the child was better, and a glimmer of hope sprang up in Joan, but it went out again long ere that lit by its living spark in every other creature in the house even thought of waning. Tiredly, patiently, she tried again and again to hope, but each time she failed.

Then she held her peace and let the others hope on.

"If George would come, if only George would come and pray," she thought stonily. "It will be a horror to George if baby should go without his prayers. Grievances and consolations vary so oddly."

She went at last obediently to have some soup, leaving the doctors in charge. She came back quietly, and stood in the doorway paralysed by something one of the men was saying.

"It's an extraordinary case—inexplicable from every scientific point of view. It would have needed a power of prophecy, not granted to our profession, to venture upon the treatment, but had we begun stimulants three hours ago, we might, I firmly believe, have saved the child. For God's sake don't let it out to the mother."

But Joan was beside them before they saw her.

"Are you quite sure of what you say?" she simply asked.

They both started. At the end of a long pause, one man said, in a low hesitating voice:

"Where a human life is at stake one can never be quite sure."

"But I've been sure all this last hour. But I wish I hadn't known actually. I wish I hadn't heard."

Her erect, proud little head fell suddenly as though she had received a blow. "If," she thought, "if only I'd caught

the train." And quietly, invincibly, inexorably, a growing resentment against George and all he represented took hold of Joan's wild heart.

But dim memories came—soon pricking in amongst the evil thoughts. She turned half vaguely to the two men.

"Don't tell this to anyone else. Not anyone else, not even my husband—especially not my husband. It will only do harm, only hurt more. And," she added, looking attentively at their faces, "don't be blaming yourselves. I don't blame you in the least. Things have been too strong for all of us, that's all."

"God in Heaven help you, Mrs. Winnington," said the elder man. "I'd have given my right hand to save the child. We took what seemed to us the right course—technically, it was the right course—but——"

"Things were too strong for us," repeated Joan under her breath, "that's all."

With bent heads they turned to leave the room, but the elder man came back.

He was a kind man, full of a quiet diffident religion, and had marvelled at this young girl in a score of pauper houses.

"It is too sad even for *me* to think of—to discuss," he said. "What it is for you, only God knows, but at least I can thank Him that you will not sorrow as those without hope."

She looked at him. He was a gaunt, ungainly man, with red cheeks and curious side whiskers, his disturbed face worked.

He looked so funny—so funny—it was all so funny, and her own little child was dying. If she could not laugh out her heart must surely burst.

But even in her uncontrol Joan was gentle.

The soft, womanly ripple in that terrible laugh rang for many a long day in the big, useful ears of that good, homespun man, and many a time by his bedside at night did he pray for little Mrs. George Winnington.

But old Jasper in the doorway leaned against the lintel, and shook for fear.

He had seen the truth in the three faces. And there was more in the girl's face than even the death of her first-born had ever brought to a good woman's eyes. "Neither death

nor hell could alter a woman in this way," thought Jasper. There's some d—— tommy rot of George's here. My little girl, my little girl! Don't!" he whispered, his strong hand steadying her, for she was swaying a little. "Don't! we all depend on you."

"If you knew," she said, "if you knew," and she chuckled in a horrified way. "The oddness of the whole thing, the muddle, the grotesque sort of disproportion."

"Do you suppose I don't know, I?" With firm gentleness he stroked her shoulder. "Now still and so thin," he sadly thought. "It was the oddness, the grotesqueness, the disproportion, the hideous muddle, the horrible inexorable humour in the discord that drove me to drink. It's driven saints to model gargoyles and paint devils. Sometimes it drives women mad. The only thing now left you to do, my girl, is to get back as quick as you can to old habits, to the habit that's brought you, and the likes of you, through many a Hell, to think of others and forget yourself. Believe me, it's the one and only hope for any woman upon her beam ends."

"I—I haven't forgotten others—not quite—I want George more than I ever wanted him before to—to pray for Baby. And the ungentle smile was still upon her lips. "He'd be so sorry if he didn't; it's so little to deny any man. When can he be here?"

"Heron has gone for him; he took the big bay and the light cart."

"Ah! Captain Heron will be quick."

"Do you think," she cried suddenly, her eyes flashing, smothered passion in her low voice, "do you think that during any moment of this night George will be able to say, 'Thy will be done.' To say it, and believe it."

"It's time for the child's brandy," said the Squire gently.

"It's only just time. I couldn't forget, surely—not that, not that. Please make them bring me beef tea and things—I do want to feel right. It must be so much easier. Baby's getting no warmer—it doesn't make him warmer any longer. Stoop down and listen; he's saying, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy! Has he been saying it long? When did he begin?"

"At eight o'clock."

"If I'd caught the first train I'd have been here by eight."

I heard him at breakfast yesterday, or was it to-day? That's why I came. Did Captain Heron tell you?"

"Yes, my girl."

She looked up sharply. "And you both blamed George in a silent sort of way. The way men blame each other. It's an obstinate and vindictive way, and it's absolutely unfair to George. He didn't realise that I wanted to come. Your letter told nothing. I couldn't tell George that baby was calling; no man could understand. You don't understand yourself; and George had more than life or death to deal with. Understand that George has been right all through," she commanded.

"I understand, perfectly, my child," he said soothingly.

"Don't forget then ever, whatever happens—that even if he'd known, if the choice had been given him—he did right, he chose rightly. He did what Moses and Aaron and the prophets should have done—and sometimes didn't, I wonder—I wonder if their wives were glad. If George had been a soldier," she said abruptly, "and this all happened for—for honour's sake—as it's happened, we'd have been glad, you and I, we'd have been full of immense pride in George. It's how we're made. It's a dreadful make. "Oh! Grandad! you don't think I'll ever take to drink too? Sometimes I wonder—oh, I wonder! We're so ridiculously alike, we two. And it makes things so hard—so hard. Don't you think?"

"God in Heaven help us, my girl. You never said a truer word."

She softly laid her head, for an instant, against his arm, she then began to chafe the little chill feet, trying to hope. Jasper saw the effort made, and relinquished, and waited mutely.

"The oddness," she muttered, her eyes dry and wide and hard, "the curiousness. It's all so great, so wonderful, but oh, if you could only see Henty's body!"

"But George was right, right, right," she repeated, a panic breaking the hard, calm of her eyes.

"He's colder," she said presently, her voice melting back into its old likeness, "just a little colder."

The Squire, numb with agony, wondered what would come next, when suddenly Joan lifted her head, listened intently, and stood up facing him. For an instant, she

hesitated, softly panting, then moved gently to the other side of the cot.

The child's eyes feebly followed her, and now he mixed up his whispers of "Mummy" with little wandering scraps of rhyme. She turned the small flower of a face towards her, and in the purple of the dawn she waited for her husband; between him and her the death of their first-born child.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AFTERWARDS Joan gave as little trouble as she could. She ate and drank obediently, and lay down when counselled to do so. She was grateful for the tenderness showered upon her, offered no resistance to anything, and was passive and docile even when Miss Rebecca, at her wits' end to reach the human heart of the girl, thinking as a preliminary to touch her temper, let Mrs. Worrall in upon her. For a solid twenty minutes did this lady expound Peter, and Peter's expert handling of the griefs peculiar to humanity, even in a large model town parish, to the poor little mother, yet without visible effect.

Joan sat and lay, talked or was silent, and all the time the little dead child barred the way to love, for his mother's heart was wholly occupied in hating the souls of men.

That within Joan which made the touches of George unbearable, the future a horror, grew up minute by minute gourd-like. She tried to struggle against it, but now she was too tired to fight hard. She had got beyond herself, and all her strength was slipping away.

The second day, in a kind of despair, Heron came in, bringing her white flowers. The minute before she had, in spite of herself, winced away from George. George knew it. Knowing that he knew his wife was frozen into a sort of helpless remorse.

Involuntarily shunning her husband, Joan's eyes turned to Heron, and the appeal in them was plainer than words.

He knew, if any human creature ever did, the fears that broke her, the anguish that rent ; it seemed to her at this moment, definitely and distinctly, as all along it had vaguely done, that it was he alone who could help her.

She must get away from everyone—from everything else. She was so tired—so tired—she could do nothing alone now. So help her he must.

And this very distinctly did she tell the miserable man with her beautiful, irresistible eyes.

Moreover, unused to oblique dealings, she did it under the very nose of George.

Heron was aghast, for George seemingly could also read eyes and had forgotten nothing. He was now staring dumbly from Joan to him, from him to Joan, upon his face astonished and stern inquiry.

For Captain Heron it was the most helpless and God-forsaken moment of his life.

For George the most chaotic and amazing.

Joan—Joan—heart of his heart, life and soul of him in this her day of tribulation, to be turning from him to another man ! Men have been deluded of devils before this. George drew his fingers across his confused eyes and looked again to make sure. Joan had now mechanically taken the flowers in her hand and was looking absently at the glory of their whiteness.

After a moment's further consideration, obviously totally unconnected with the innocent blooms, again she lifted to Heron questioning eyes that slowly melted to entreating ones.

For one instant George hesitated ; his eyes rested upon Joan ; his lips moved ; the next he bit down upon words, turned on his heel, and quitted the room. And there went in his heart that which is more cruel than the grave.

Heron swung round precipitately and was fain to follow him, a half vague intention of having it out with the man forming in his mind, but Joan called, and perforce he must obey.

She was looking a little dazed, and he thought she shivered.

"You're not going?" said she, plainly to give herself time.

"I came over to see if I could be of any use," he said lamely. "It doesn't seem as though I can be," he added, with a certain grim intonation, "so I'd better go."

He hesitated and looked at his boots. "The Squire is with Miss Rebecca, and George will be wanting you," said he.

"Yes, George will be wanting me," she repeated indeterminately, slowly standing up. "But do stay and talk to the others. The silence and the cold have got into us, and we're all rather afraid of each other. Anyone from the outside—who understands—can't be let go in such a hurry."

She looked at him, paused, and looked away again. "I wish——" she passionately broke out, "I wish——"

Heron nervously dropped his head, but she left her sentence incompleated, and slightly caught her breath. "I'll go to George and please you go to *them*," she said in her usual voice. "You don't know how much you help us, really."

"Good God," thought Heron, looking after her, "she's as mad as blazes, small blame to her, but what's a man to do? The old people are beyond logic; it's not for me to tackle George—just yet—must wait till he cools down and she steadies herself. Tired, and ill, and mad, and thinking he's killed the boy! God help women! Oh! Joan! Joan! Joan!" he cried in his heart, "and I could have made you happy."

The old people, full of unspoken, unspeakable anguish at the strange indefinable alteration going on in Joan, at the silent heartlessness of her grieving, found real, frank relief in Heron's sympathetic presence, free of riddle or foreboding. To absent himself, therefore, howsoever George might feel about it, the next day, or the next, would have amounted to a discourteous cruelty.

By that time, he argued, with a wry mouth, George might, perhaps, discern that much sorrow had made his wife mad, also that in her right senses she could never wound or offend him even by look—that in her senses she loved him utterly.

Heron had no idea that anyone but himself knew that had the mother been in time her child had probably lived.

He had fairly forced the fact from the doctors. It confounded him.

Her silence upon this matter to her husband, her unflinching determination to spare him this ultimate bitterness seemed to him the maddest touch in this chaos, but it was natural enough in a way and surely not for him to disregard her express commands in the matter. Used to the irrational ways of women, Rob Heron took the vagaries of Joan rather more for granted than was wise perhaps. Her stubbornness in self-sacrifice, coupled with her extraordinary treatment of George upon the previous day, did not very much discompose him; for in his compassionate, old-fashioned creed no man can bet upon what an over-tired woman may not do, and this one, after all, was desperate.

Of all those who loved Joan, he was the only one who did not over-estimate her strength, whilst he had a wholesome belief in his own. He could never bring himself to believe that women's backs had originally been made for the carrying of burthens. It had only been by an unhappy accident that women had ever been turned into beasts of burthen. Thus he always found it more natural that women should depend upon him than that he should fall into the way of depending upon them.

"Looking at it from her point of view," Rob told himself with some spiritual pride, "I can quite understand how her love for George has fallen for the moment into—confusion. It will sort itself presently," he thought, with a sigh he failed to stifle, "if he's not a born ass; meanwhile—oh! well, meanwhile I'm neck and crop in the business, so it seems. God knows I'd be glad enough to get out of it by hook or by crook, but how in the devil's name can I? Since I'm here, anyway, I'll do the best I can for her—whatever happens, and square things with George presently. They'll want some squaring too, I'm afraid," he said gloomily. "For in spite of all the saint in him he's got the Winnington turn of mind, has George, unless I saw double more than once."

"It's the devil's own business, anyway—I wish I was out of it," he mused, as he drove up the last hill on his late way home. "Even if I wrote to George," he went on, "how on earth could I tell him that practically he *did* kill

the child? Besides, until the twist in the poor girl is smoothed out, telling him wouldn't much mend matters that I can see. She'll get back to him in her own way; no one can very well push the poor little thing into his arms."

And so for many causes, shaking in his shoes, yet with intrepidity, when the day came, Heron set forth to the funeral.

Together the sad little party stood amongst the Infinities. Those who could pray, prayed, those who could weep, wept. Joan's eyes were dry and her hand lay cold in her husband's grasp. She tried loyally not to hate his touch, not to hate God, and to get the warmth back into her frozen heart.

As they all turned to go home Heron was quietly and thankfully slipping away; Joan saw him and in a sharp, low tone of command told him to remain.

At such a time he could do no less than she asked, but in her hot, restless eyes, in her dreadful silent efforts to steady herself, he saw danger ahead.

And upon George had fallen blindness.

By this time George had apparently overcome his jealous wrath; his gentle, thoughtful solicitude for his wife was spontaneous and seemingly untroubled by any hideous by thought.

But Heron knew that in no sort of way could this comfort the coldness of death that lay between these two labouring souls.

He looked again at Joan and it seemed to him that gentle, passive, controlled, as the girl seemed, in the mighty tempest that had laid bare the soul, heart, and spirit of her, the tigerish quality in every mother's love for her child, smothered in the fragrant old roses of time—and of generations of culture—had sprung to the surface.

And in this spirit this woman was judging a jealous man!

"In women," so Heron thought, being in some of his thinkings somewhat mannish, "justice is an accomplishment; in man it's a birthright. It depends upon himself how he plays the fool with his gift."

He was therefore most uncomfortably sorry for George and made some very excellent shots at Joan's condition.

But he stood steady in what seemed to him to be his post of duty, and awaited developments.

Never, to the day of his death, did Rob think without squirming of the eternal drag of that dreadful afternoon. It was absolutely necessary that at the close of it George should return for some special sacred duty, to Aiken. Joan had made not the slightest motion towards accompanying him, and yet in their nervous anguish of doubt and confusion both the old people assumed, with almost stupid insistence, that it was only Joan's thought for them that hindered her from rushing back to devotion, George, and duty.

The general disruption in all things seemed to be hustling the Squire's common sense, and taking the keen edge off his native acuteness.

Whilst the whole of Miss Rebecca not put out of action by sorrow, went wistfully out to Jasper.

As for George, having violently sinned and as violently repented him of his sin and fought down successfully a whole heart-ful of unexpected passions, he was resolved to possess his soul in patience, and whilst waiting, trust.

In short, not a soul amongst them but Heron would dare to admit even to himself the madness of Joan.

She herself, indeed, had caught glimpses of it. When she came back from seeing George off, a strange smile upon her lips, Heron had seen her fetch up with a start before the tall hall glass, stand for one perplexed moment, then flee, fear upon her face, to her room. He had seen her literally swing her thoughts from some unseen danger, watch herself, guard herself from herself.

Everything she did upon this strange day was most bitterly patent to the unfortunate man, most bitterly pregnant.

Fear was upon the track of her, and who could help?

The dimness of twilight was in the air when Joan asked him at last to go out with her.

Little Mrs. George set the standard of conduct in that loving household, else surprised eyelids might have been raised that she should go a-walking with the blinds still down, when man like the stricken beast is supposed to crouch hidden in his hole. As it was, every man and maid

in the house felt an awed gladness that she should take the air in the company of one in whom they had such boundless trust and confidence.

But with one impulse Jasper and Rebecca, who had been crouching beside the fire, bending one toward the other, stood up and went to the window to watch the two down the avenue of lindens out of their sight.

"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there for someone," said Jasper at last. "Come back to the fire, Rebecca." He laid his hand kindly upon hers, "Come back, old friend."

But Rebecca was bristling. "I detest insinuations," she snapped, "and in this time of sorrow they seem to be odious beyond words."

"No sorrow will keep the devil out," sighed Jasper. "Joan takes her sorrow in an amazingly attractive way. You may eject the fatal Third out of a woman's horizon with pitchforks, but he'll crop up."

"Not with Joan."

"You speak as a woman, Rebecca."

"How then, pray, would you have me speak? As a born fool?"

"Rebecca—you know——"

"I know nothing of the sort. Pray proceed with your unworthy suggestions without reference to me. I thank God I have the fullest confidence in Joan."

"So have I. It's of the man I'm thinking."

"Men are weak, Heavens knows, but even then no man of honour——"

"But when a sense of duty edges itself into the infernal business where are you then, I'd like to know? Rob Heron——"

"Is, to my mind, all that a young man should be."

"Quite so, dear lady, but he's twenty-seven, and look at Joan!"

"I never hoped to look at her in a setting so vulgar and hackneyed as this you seem able to suggest without a blush."

"Had you been a man——"

"Thank God, I'm not. Are you all evil?"

"We're all, alas! men."

"Collect yourself, Jasper."

"We must strive at least to deal rationally with this matter."

"Rationally! Dear! Dear!"

"On the whole we'd better, I fear, leave the thing in Heron's hands and stick to prayer."

"No time this for blasphemous flippancy."

"You're thoroughly upset, my poor girl. Blasphemous flippancy! I hardly think——"

"For Heaven's sake do let us think, then. Time, indeed, we did begin to think! To leave such things in the hands of children, you and I, each with a foot in the grave!"

"Aren't we harrowed enough without that, Rebecca? Will women spare you nothing?"

"Men can only swallow sugared truth, I believe. I've been seeing things, feeling things, not daring to look at things, these three awful days, expecting *you* to have the grace at least to speak out."

"My dear Rebecca—what! with a woman to do it? I've been waiting for *you*. I, too, have seen the cloud no bigger than a man's hand arise up between them, and I hoped—I hoped it would vanish or break when the blow came in—in—healing rain."

"She can have no—no cause?" faltered Rebecca.

"God knows," groaned Jasper, "when it's to do with a saint insufficiently curated."

"Where does the other man come in? What's brought him?"

"My daughter-in-law," said Jasper somewhat wildly, "is well bred to the core."

"So was Ophelia, according to her lights, but she went about in broad daylight in duck-weed and a rag!"

Jasper moved restlessly. "We shouldn't have let them go."

"We had no choice."

"Suppose we go to meet them?"

Even close to the fire Rebecca was cold to the bone, and the East wind blew drearily, but she arose at once. "Yes, we'd better go to meet them," she said, but she paused before she moved. "I thought we so thoroughly knew her," she said.

"So did I till Wednesday. The girl has somehow lost her way, I think."

"And gone to an amateur to find it for her," said Rebecca tartly.

Jasper solemnly stood up and faced her. "Look here, Rebecca, if that beast of prey, jealousy, is about to enter into you fling him out or he'll be gnawing at your vitals before you can say 'knife.' I've been in grips with him myself these three days, and it's that, I fear, that's been obscuring my mental vision. Youth," he continued, "forbidden or lawful, holds a magic for youth. The barrier built by the years is a bitter one. The moment comes in all our lives, dear, when we must lay down our tried and proven arms before it, and watch whilst they with untried, unproven ones attack life. If we are not called upon to witness defeat which, steered by our skill, would have been victory, we may thank our stars. I wish," he added in a more robust tone, "that I'd chanced a rebuff and tackled her. But our damned pride is seemingly the one perennial, evergreen left us. But don't be sweeping and intolerant anyway, Rebecca. Remember at least that Rob Heron is a right good fellow. All the same, I'd give my eyes to kick the fellow into space," mused Jasper, when she had gone. "But I mustn't let Rebecca see that. The best woman living will take advantage of you if she gets the chance. Gives 'em a leg-up moreover to be watching *you* overcoming. And after all it's not necessary women should see *all* the bloody sweat that goes to the infernal grind."

With consolation near, to think of grief is fatal.

The steps of Jasper, by no will of their own, had carried him post haste to the dining-room side-board. Before he was quite coherently aware of his action, the decanter was in his hand.

It was no sudden temptation that had gotten hold of old Jasper. Since the stroke fell it had been a goad unto him, an ache that knew no soothing, a knife turning in a wound. And the antidote was now in his hand.

In three hundred seconds from then he might be floating in a very respectable Heaven of his own. For in none of Jasper's airy erections did even one low purlieu skulk. Hope would have arisen from her grave, and he would be young again—young with a difference.

The god in him somewhat emphasised, perchance, his wit grown keener.

A tempest of moral reflections swept through this chaotic mind and for each morality there cropped up a counter argument.

Morality was already on her death-bed, and the horizon of the Squire was rosy again.

But suddenly it struck Jasper sharply that if a seasoned soldier could thus fall to the strokes of a wily adversary, what in God's name could be expected in the way of resistance of a poor, raw little recruit unlearned in the uses of arms?

And so presently the Squire stumbled from Heaven to Hell, an old man with sweat upon his brow.

He emptied the glass behind the fire, and was back in the drawing-room before Rebecca caught him.

"It would be pleasant to tell her," he thought, moving restlessly upon his seat, "but she'd not see the thing in the same light may be. Some day I'll tell the little girl, *she'll* understand. Perhaps the experience may even give her a leg-up; who knows? I'd be glad indeed if some good does come of the confounded business. Ha! Rebecca! well wrapped up, I hope?"

At first Joan, driven by her natural inclination to make people comfortable, had made remarks about the weather and the troubled sky, but the foolish little words dropping raspingly from dry lips were more than Heron could stand. He fell back into an old way he had with his mother, took hold of Joan's arm and impatiently, protestingly, coolly shook it.

"Why do you say anything till you're ready?" he asked. "We're surely too good friends for that? I'm not hankering to know more, believe me, but if you've got things you must say, don't say them till you must."

So they silently walked half across the park, and once of twice Joan walked blindly, then in a second his hand was out to help her.

It was a walk to make a man grow old, but in the pathetic reaching out of his disordered brain the girl grew younger.

At last the words came headlong.

"I can't go back to George," she said, "I can't, not yet. How can I tell him? What can I do? I can't think any longer. *You'll* have to help me."

Heron had expected at least a prelude!

"Mrs. Winnington, I believe," he said hesitating, "I believe that as much as any man can understand a woman's point of view, I understand yours. It's no use pretending ignorance or attempting to mince matters. The child's death has risen up between you and George because you believe him to be the cause of—it."

"The Church has been the cause of my child's death."

"That's sophistry. George is the soldier of the Church. Would you think better of him if he hadn't been up to his neck in a duty which even you confess to have been paramount? If he'd funk'd it for more or less of an idea, a—a—whim?"

"That sort of thing won't help me," she said slowly. "It's written large all over me. Did arguments—did knowledge—did knowing the right—did common sense prevent your loving *me*? The Church is Juggernaut's car and it's gone over me, so I must escape from under it before I get well again. I can't go back to George and do Church work, I can't go to see miserable people with this in my heart. I can't help George at night with his wonderful work; he in Heaven and I in Hell! It's not a question of right and wrong, it's just a question of what one can do. Could I, do you think, explain this to George, or to George's father, or to Rebecca? I can't face one of them. You care for me in an irrational sort of way, so perhaps you'll understand. I'm so tired. Take me anywhere to rest, if you love me—and—and there's no need to spare you! Take me"

"If I love you," cried the distracted man, "but it's because I love you that I must try—to keep my head, and run no insane mucker. Good God! can't you see?" In his fear and confusion he soundly shook her. "You're the kindest woman in the world—when you're all right. There's a sense of justice about you, too. Can't you think for a minute and you'll see how beastly unfair to *me* you are."

"I can't think any more and I must go away, I can't go back," she said in stony despair. "I can't go back to George, and I'm so tired. I haven't any money even, I can't manage things alone. I knew—I knew I should fail when the—the big thing came."

"Supposing I did take you away, what do you suppose George would say?"

"George!"

"What would you say yourself—to-morrow? You'd both turn on me, you and George, and I should be nowhere. I love you and you love George, therefore the sooner I get you back if not to him—anyway to safety—the better, I take it, for the lot of us. Being a man," he resumed, in despair at her attitude, "gives you more authority in these matters than any woman can lay claim to."

Then he began to shake like a man with a palsy, for now her mad head had dropped upon his arm, and she was clinging to him for support.

"I can't go back," she whispered, "till I get right."

"Steady yourself, for God's sake, and don't be so unreasonable."

A sudden spark of light seemed to flicker up in his clouded intelligence. "Look here now, Mrs. Winnington," he entreated, "and be fair—at least. The person responsible for the dear little chap's death, if you look straight at it—is—is yourself."

She grasped him convulsively. They were standing out in the path in a broad streak of moonlight, and although the words he spoke were the words of wisdom, the unbrotherly hand of Rob tenderly held her.

To the most unprejudiced observer the man was as mad as the woman.

"You never, I'll bet anything, said one definite word about your fears to George," he pursued. "It would have been totally unlike you to—to do anything so sensible, and George, as I said before, was at his post, and your face if anything kept him steady there. It's the sort of face that does, you know," he added, strangling a groan. "Mrs. Winnington I don't say you did right, mind, in this case—no man can decide for any woman in so delicate a matter, but at any rate it's not for you now to be blaming George; and the Church, I would have you to know, is not the only profession in which the woman's interests must go bang if the man is to stick to his duty. I used to think you'd be the best soldier's wife that ever lived, Mrs. Winnington, but—by Jove! this is not like it."

She lifted herself and faced him.

"If—if George had been a soldier!"—she drew her fingers across her eyes—"that's part of the awfulness. Oh! never mind. And if you won't help me, someone must."

She pressed closer and peered into his face.

"It's so curious, this tiredness," she said, "when you can't do things any more for yourself, but yet you know they must get done. Of course, you could hardly understand it. It confuses me."

Her face was like stone, her eyes cold and hard as pebbles, she was drawn, haggard, her youth was vanishing. If but one single straining nerve were now to snap her brain would shiver to pieces.

It was touch and go with the girl. She was white, reckless, unwomanly, growing old, but in her intimate appeal to him, in the confused horror of pain and fear upon her shadowy face, in her wild, quick, panting breaths, in her petulance and unreason, she was wholly adorable.

In an agony of human passion, in a more bitter one of impotence as a counsellor, Heron stood staring, his wits in confusion.

With a look of cold, helpless disappointment she slowly turned away.

"Oh, well!" said she, "I must go somewhere."

And then an inspiration came to Rob.

"I say"—in his relief he shouted it—"what have we been thinking of? Why, the Bishop's the very man we want."

She walked rapidly back.

"But, good God, you're not going now," he shouted, "not this minute? Look at the weather—you'll be drenched in ten minutes."

"It seems so amazing not to have thought of him before," she panted, still forging on.

"Good Lord," he thought, with some difficulty keeping up with her, "March hares aren't in this!"

"We'll just catch the train," said she. "Oh! what a lucky thought of yours."

"Mrs. Winnington, we're not alone in this; there are others to consider. One word of explanation will put things right with them. Your clothes?"

"They don't matter, and George is at Aiken; I'll write."

"My uncle would come to you."

"I'll get to him sooner. I can't go back. Oh! why *won't* you understand?"

She was beyond argument.

"I'm at the mercy of Providence now, any way," reflected her escort. "All I've got to do is to sit tight."

He put his arm about her passive form and helped her forward.

The swirling winds, which for hours had been beating back the rain, had paused to rest a spell, the bulging clouds pounded down and the waters descended upon the flying pair.

Captain Heron did what he could to protect her little worn body, but it was a drenched, shivering, half-inarticulate creature that he at last deposited in a first-class compartment of the train bound for Marven.

"Just get my ticket," she jerked through chattering teeth, "and go back and tell them I'll write to George myself."

"I'll see to everything," he answered vaguely, and was off.

He had two minutes and a half in which to write his note and secure tickets, a messenger for the note, and some brandy for the girl.

But he was in beside her just as the train moved off. He had certainly had no time for any detached explanation of their mad jaunt, but felt notwithstanding a pleasing confidence that at least the few sentences he could get written must tell enough to square things more or less and send someone along by the first train next morning.

But it is generally the third who manages to wry the situation.

The porter, goggled-eyed with wonder and just off his shift, with a hereditary appreciation of the Squire's kitchen, was all for haste and sustenance at the other end, but his wife, a wary woman, knew well what form that sustenance would take. Moreover, a weakness at the pit of Jahn's stomach due to deferred tea and gold in his breeches pockets would inevitably mean calls by the way.

Likewise to wash before facing the gentry was one of the articles of Jahn's wife's creed.

She insisted therefore upon Jahn's "a-clanin' an' a-ridden" whilst she got him food.

In her ineradicable habit of making clean sweeps, Mrs. Jahn, however, burnt the untidy note, a scrap of paper in a rumpled telegraph envelope, that Jahn unfortunately had laid in his excitement upon a heap of leaflets lately left for the comfort of his wife's soul and the torment of her body, they being drearily thumb-marked and of an unpleasing perfume.

Jahn was an honest fellow, however, and resolved to earn his half-sovereign one way or the other.

Amid a shower of blasphemy, scorning tea, he started for the Hall.

Human nature, however, upon an empty stomach is weak. After several pauses to still the gnawings at his vitals and after frequent recitals of the amazing occurrence—Mrs. George's disordered condition, and the young Cappen's haste—things grew confused in Jahn's mind, and in the craftiness of drunkenness, in his final recital of his marvellous experiences in the village Inn, he carefully omitted any mention whatsoever of the burnt letter and posed as a philanthropist pure and simple.

Having reeled out all he knew and had wit to invent, he collapsed in a heap upon the sanded floor.

The landlord hereupon threw on his overcoat and carried the tale forward.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BEFORE he left Joan, George, to the best of his belief, had plucked the last little spark of jealousy from his heart. But still the wound ached, and the ache kept the cause of it alert within him.

Away from Joan, back in his sorrowful house, in the clammy airs, amidst his people with warm hearts, coarse thumbs, and a constitutional craving for the detailed amenities of woe, the fact that Heron was beside her stood up stark in his bleak horizon.

It was an unworthy vision insulting to Joan, to him, to the man they both so highly valued, but it persisted. It dogged his footsteps, it got into his prayers, it threw a veil between him and the altar, that no anguish could ever have had the power to do.

But the aftermath of sin will always endure.

With all his might did George beat down the venomous thing. He threw himself headlong, almost violently, into his work. He guiltily sought out Henty. He betook himself to the little children with clean hearts, but it persisted, it persisted, this passion that had gotten hold of George.

By three o'clock he felt a palpitating dismay of soul that good works and human touches failed to still. At four, he felt sick, body and mind.

At five, in his cheerless room, an abomination of desolation which Joan had turned to Paradise; a cup of charwoman's tea before him in a kitchen cup, for the servants had not yet returned, to get back to Joan, to right the widening wrong grew too strong for further resistance.

There was now no reason why he should not go. He had done the important thing he had come to do.

The curates were devoted and heart-broken—they had loved the child; they adored the mother.

So in the end George caught the train which Joan had missed, and was walking with long impatient strides up the avenue of tall trees, when not twenty yards from him Joan hove in sight.

Repressing an exclamation of delight, remorseful, ashamed, heart, spirit, soul, going impassionately forth to his wife, George went eagerly on.

Of a sudden Joan halted, the next minute she was clinging to Heron, and then her head was on his arm.

George squared his great shoulders, clenched his fists, and rushed on like a black-coated Berserker.

But—perhaps unfortunately—the habit of self-control for which these many years he had been striving so hard, fetched him up.

But if George could not for the moment face his wife, as little could he pry upon her. He turned and flung back into the oak wood, and there for a solid hour did he furiously wrestle with doubt, dismay, and the devil.

When he got home he was broken, sad, and tired,

but considering temperament and the circumstance, he had jockeyed himself into a fairly reasonable state of mind.

Just as George entered the stricken house by the front door, the landlord of the "Fox and Goose" lurched in by the back.

But even before he heard the confused, amazing disclosures of Jonathan Hall, every face that met George looked blank. A chill more deathlike than death had fallen upon the breathless household.

With his horrible knowledge turning like a two-edged sword in his heart, George stood silent whilst the man stuttered forth his burthen of news, and the inevitable unutterable questions came with an odd, slow doggedness from the squire's lips. He had been seated when the man was shown in, but as the story jerked forward upon its deathly course he lifted himself to his full height, and stood up beside George. And the indomitable pride upon the faces of the two men, both at that moment so tragically alike, muffled in a regal cloak any less dignified emotion.

The squire asked the questions, but it was George who stood at the last in the breach, and as one with authority explained the unexplainable.

"My wife was mad with grief," said he, "it was the fear of such a possibility that brought me back to-night," he added, magnificently lying.

"Captain Heron naturally could not allow Mrs. Winnington to travel alone at this hour of the night. It's most fortunate he is with her, and there was apparently no time to write. Only last month one of my own parishioners wandered as far as Purly, mad with grief, and wasn't found for three days. I'm much obliged to you, my man. Go down and have something in the kitchen, and here's for your trouble."

When the man had gone, the two old people hung their heads, and they were all silent.

But Rebecca soon raised hers. "There's some horrible muddle here," she said.

"Yes," said George, "there's some horrible muddle, and the last train left just twenty minutes ago."

The squire's head was now in air.

"Fortunately," said he, with fine composure, "what in

heaven's name would be the use of starting off on a wild goose chase? we'll know by the first post where she is. 'Tisn't as though she were alone, and ill—bodily."

George looked vaguely at him, and stooped to warm his hands. But the brilliant living fire seemed to throw out no more heat than a painted one.

Miss Rebecca, with a swift glance at father and son, quietly rose, and trembling, left the room.

"He looks," she thought in agony, "as Jasper looked when Isabella betrayed him. He, too, stood beside the fire, in the little oak room, and tried to warm himself."

She paused upon the third step, and reddened darkly, and stamped.

"And to dare to look in that sort of way about our Joan," she muttered. "I'd better, indeed, get to my room! Possibly a Winnington may be able to bring a Winnington to his right mind. At least, Jasper had the excuse of ample cause," she mused, "and his unregenerate soul found outlets at hand; he had some common sense, too, and humour. But a saint pure and simple to be dominated and devastated by so supreme a passion! George won't know what to do with it," she wailed. "It's too gross an inmate for such a soul. While he's contending with it, in his high-minded way, it will be steadily burning him up. 'Tisn't prayerful courtesy, God help the boy, a vice like that wants. It will turn that inexperienced lad stone blind, that's what it will do. Don't I know the Winningtons for my sins? And George was one of them before ever he became a saint. He may have overcome a deal, poor darling, but he's not yet got the better of Jasper, and that outrageous great-grandmother. Oh! God help the lot of us! And this unhappy young man in love with her before that first week was out! What between love and pity, and being twenty-seven, he can't be reckoned responsible, and with Joan mad! Where are they? In Heaven's name, where are they?" she demanded of the blank ceiling. "Mad! mad! mad! I hope to God there's no method in the madness upon *his* side. I hope," she proceeded presently, "that Jasper will have the wit to order up dinner. Their incarnate pride—his and George's—will make them eat; they want food." She steadied her hands and dried her eyes, put her wild hair straight, and then sat sadly

down beside the fire, which owing to the general disruption of the household, only wearily smouldered.

"The loneliness of an old woman who is unmarried," she thought presently, with grey lips, "is rather hard to bear. At all the crucial moments we must stand aside and wait whilst the real action of the play goes on without us. We are just supernumeraries, unless, indeed," she added scornfully, catching sight of her unlovely figure in a gleaming mirror, "we sit and puff."

"Half-past-eight," she cried, "and no sign of dinner! At least, I can see to that!"

She looked out into the soft, black night, and the big mother's heart in her ached to go out after Joan, or down to the boy who might have been hers; the rest of her drew irresistibly to the man she loved, and who, alas! liked her.

But there was no beautiful ordered place for Rebecca anywhere in all the tragedy. So she went down quietly and made them bring up dinner, and her kind, honest presence comforted both man and maiden; righting the young mistress in the hustled minds of both, and then, with homely practicality she built up strong and seemly bulwarks about anguished souls, leaving the rest to God.

And all that aching evening she knitted on bravely, made characteristic remarks, and was as a pleasant shaded lamp in some sweet and warm house place, to two weary men groping without in a great darkness.

But sometimes for a fleeting instant Rebecca longed piteously for some sure anchorage in some life, from which no storm could oust her. It seemed hard to her to stand always upon the threshold of every grief.

But as she went up the stairs that night, her obscured senses suddenly cleared.

She turned, and stumped down again back to the men.

"What fools we are! What born asses!" she cried. "She's gone, of course, to the Bishop. She was giddy and dazed, and could see no light in her darkness, and she's gone to the one man who could show her some. Rob Heron evidently has given us credit for more sense than we possess. Instead of glowering over the fire, George, get to bed, boy! and start by the first train. To have been torturing ourselves all the evening with vague surmises;

each insulting to our common sense," she said desperately, to George's stony face.

Jasper wrung her hand.

"You're a brick, Rebecca," said he, an unutterable weight lifted from his simple heart.

"I'll start at seven," said George.

But as he was lighting his candle, Rebecca closely watched him. A flicker of cynical mockery hung about his sweet, firm, boy's mouth.

She had seen the like eight-and-twenty years ago upon his father's face.

"Oh, my poor saint," she thought, with a bleeding heart, "my poor, poor saint—one—one might, at least, shake a sinner!"

In his quick, sympathetic way, George saw her disappointment, and smiled gratefully in her disturbed face.

"You're a brick, if ever there was one," he said.

"Go to bed, George, do, *La nuit porte conseil*, so they say, and our poor mad Joan will want some managing. Sleep, boy!"

But suddenly lifting her candle-stick as though it were a denunciation, she squared up to him.

"Are all you saints of this abominable generation the lineal descendants of that poor craven Thomas? Stop thinking, George, stop it, for God's sake. To think in your present frame of mind is to insult our Joan, and your own understanding. Go to bed," she commanded. "Your contract with Wady is out, isn't it?" she said suddenly, pausing upon one foot.

"Yes," said George, rather dumb-founded.

"In that case I'll bring you something to sweeten your imagination."

She marched off to compound, with scientific accuracy, a delectable mixture of whiskey, lemon, and hot water.

"And to think," she miserably muttered, "to think I should be called upon to drive common decency into a budding bishop through the base medium of hot grog!"

"Oh! my Joan—my poor, poor, poor pair of born idiots."

George drank the grog.

And in his sleep the practice of sweet charity returned to his soul, and the poison of doubt departed therefrom.

But anger and doubt came back with the dawn.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE Bishop was abed when the drenched fugitives reached the Palace, and both sick and tired.

There was a pestilence in his foetid diocese, and he was of those ecclesiastics who leave the lighter chores to the minor clergy. Day in, day out, he fought the plague and buttressed the faint-hearted with a cheerful courage. He comforted the dying, and widows who had lost their all remembered till their last day the things he said unto them.

He was constant in season and out of it, and always to the point. Only in one particular did his common sense forsake him.

He went his rounds in water-logged boots. For, by reason of an overdraft at his bank, and a phenomenal bill at his grocer's, he did not feel himself justified in making personal purchases.

Thus his chest felt most unaccountably heavy, his head as though there was a fire in it, and his breath came in gusts.

Whereupon his old housekeeper—Theodosia was happily absent upon field duty—disclaiming protest, put the Bishop to bed, and laid upon him, like Aaron's breast-plate, a large mustard poultice. When acquainted by Rob with the details of the wild flight, the Bishop groaned, and nestled pathetically into his blankets.

But Joan, without her husband, her baby not dead a week, waiting at this hour of night, and Rob her guardian angel!

"I'd better go down," said the Bishop, when Rob had left him. So he arose from his warm bed, and from old habit whistled softly whilst he dressed. In his sibilant pon-

derings the poultice wriggled from its moorings and settled down, a damp smudge with a sting in it, upon a long-suffering hip.

The Bishop, however, heeded it not, or rather, unused to chest complaints, set the new sort of burning down to some complication, and devoted himself to the young people.

Having warmed and fed them, he sent Heron to bed, but warned by the wildness of the girl's eyes that her occasion could not be deferred, he softly set her, robed in his housekeeper's best purple dressing-gown, in a big chair, and waited, trusting that despite pains and burnings, shortness of breath, and a lurking sense of the ludicrous, he might be permitted to keep his head clear.

But the waiting seemed long, and when the words came, more than once did the quaking divine nervously cross and uncross his slim, sensitive hands, and wish the young creature were masculine and capable of crystallising her emotions swiftly into short sentences, or even an illuminating grunt or so.

The passionate seriousness in the tone of the words caused the Bishop to lift his chest, which stooping seemed to relieve, to a more vigilant erectness.

He had fallen into the way of associating this tone with women of a throbbing egoism, or with something to conceal ; morbidity, or unutterable husbands ; he had certainly not expected to hear it in George Winnington's wife.

Even in her confession, when woman most betrays the things about herself she refrains from mentioning, this young woman had been simple and straight, unexacting, and reasonable.

John Hilary had a dreadfully uncomfortable habit of feeling at critical moments rather young for his position, now he felt aged ; so aged and tired as to be afraid of the confidences of such curiously young youth. He sighed inwardly, and gave it all his attention.

George's wife, strenuous, strained, with wild eyes and distracted hair !

He had understood the state better in a more modern woman.

And with a racking chest, even a Bishop is not prepared for the unexpected.

"My head feels so extraordinary," Joan went on, "that

the words won't get right ; they run in and out oddly, don't you think?"

"My dear, *that* I'm used to. Pray go on."

"Ah! you must understand."

So she went on, and in spite of words he did understand, and tremble.

But to reply!

It was a ticklish predicament, and words—he had just learnt—were dangerous things. It had been easier to wait a little and pray.

But—he looked across diffidently—but that would be to offer stones for bread. And, oh! those tumultuous eyes that so greedily searched him!

In a moment's glance he crushed down his natural leanings toward a host of gentlenesses, and put upon him the whole armour of truth.

"You're too young for this life, my dear," said he, "and that's all about it, both you and George Winnington. You haven't the wit for it—yet. No married man in his senses—can't you see for yourself, you foolish child?—would go posting off to Heaven in a Juggernaut car unless his wife encouraged him. A man with a single mind and his eyes upon the Everlasting Hills, wants steering, I would have you to know. His whip-hand wants to be kept alive to some well-known, trusted, beloved touch, or he'll be going ahead blindly; and Heaven only knows what he'll be running over, or into what ditch. Why, the road without some practical eye in the business would be fairly strewn with weaker brethren.

"The way of a young enthusiast is to go headlong upon his shining path, felling difficulties and foot-passengers like nine-pins, but he must learn to go slower. You can't take Heaven at a cavalry charge, and trample down those en route neither so nimble nor so well horsed as yourself; besides running the risk of becoming yourself in the end nothing more than a window saint. In any regard in this order of advance, either man or saint must be missing the smaller humanities and losing touch with the greater. He must inevitably be waxing selfish. Nowadays we want a saint with all his senses sharp as a razor, and eyes in the back of his head. And a woman of all created beings should know, surely, how to help in the developing of this

particular brand of saint, and while he's still emerging, be capable of supplying his deficiencies. She'll not do it, believe me, by wholly effacing herself, and thus fostering and pampering the selfishness inherent in man or saint."

"George—George is different."

"We're all different with a family likeness, but in the end we amount very much to the same thing. We haven't let you and your like into the Church, my child, for perpetual priest adoration. If we'd meant that we'd have kept you outside it, in the dim religious light of the ante-chambers."

"Oh, but——"

"I don't counsel nagging," he hastily protested, "far from it, or—or a grasping personality," he added, sad with memories, "but there's reason in every virtue. If you felt as you did about the child, George had a right to know it."

"I wish I could explain—you see, Henty's soul——"

"Was, and is, of infinite importance, but so is a mother's heart, and *your* prompting had its rights as well as George's. And there's a lot of British self-consciousness even in sermon-making, and some want of faith in priests. It is difficult to judge any man through an over-conscientious woman," he peered close at her, frowning, "insufficiently nourished; you've not succeeded in acquiring a taste for cheese, I fear, but perhaps had George trusted a little more in God and less in his own right arm, he might have got things straight, sat down comfortably to his tea, and enabled you to catch your train. Anyway, since he's not taken the vow of celibacy and thus relinquished such rights, it was his right to know. By sparing him—you will see presently—you have thrown him into an anomalous—an odious position."

He paused to collect himself. Her grave, questioning eyes unconsciously reproached him.

She was so young, so white. She was suffering greatly. Unlimited tenderness was the natural thing to offer any being so forlorn and tired. But she was scarce sane enough for tenderness, John sternly impressed upon himself, and there was no time to lose. Each minute he more acutely felt the danger of his aches growing too much for his reason—what there was of it—and at all costs he must save her from the insidious tenderness of Rob Heron.

Plainly there lay more between George Winnington and his young wife than the child's death, he thoughtfully reflected. That was the crown of her sorrow, the last touch, the key that opened all the sluices.

The other things must also be reckoned with. And he ached, oh! but he ached piteously—and with his besetting sin, an unreasonable tenderness towards folly! It was hard on the Bishop.

His part in this amazing muddle was to sting the girl's pride, her grit, her interest, practically back to life, and sweep all trace of unnecessary martyrdom from the horizon.

"It seems to me," he said, his tone harshened with nervousness, "that you've been binding most unnecessary burdens upon your back, my child; heaping quite unnecessary rocks of difficulty in your path, and George's too. All conscience and high principle, no doubt, but that doesn't soften the points of the rocks which, so far as I can discern, have been reducing your feet, that will insist upon treading their jagged and unnecessary heights, to a pulpy impotence, and all with a mistaken notion of saving George, and serving him."

He paused to look at her, for in his heart he adored the serving woman, and loved survivals. In this character George Winnington's wife had always deeply interested him.

"It's built up, this barrier between her and George," he reflected, in the silence of his soul, "this ridiculous barrier, by a perfect mountain of dulness and bad air and ungrateful tasks amongst the ungrateful poor, and want of clothes, and of delicate food and amusement—curates also enter largely into it. But I can't be telling her all this."

"But instead of serving and saving George," he proceeded, sighing, "by this unnecessary habit of self-sacrifice, you're laying a rod in pickle for him, and likewise a lot of uncalled for remorse, which must prove most detrimental to his professional career. How do you imagine that George will feel, my dear, when he finds you out? He's a man, and responsible for the woman he loves. Any pain that has rent you will rend him threefold. Don't mistake me; I don't say he's not to blame. He's made of rare materials, this George of yours, his soul is proud and humble, and as white as the light, and he's ardent—bless me, but he's very

ardent—and a purblind march onward isn't modern warfare, and we must keep up with the times. It's youth and hurry, and want of humour that's the matter with George, and a zeal so fiery that it's apparently scorched yours, which needs badly, I perceive, some blowing up.

"A little more courage, a little more humour, and when you've ceased to weep together, you and George, over this infinite sorrow, you'll be laughing together merrily, the tears behind your eyes, both of you, high upon your hills. There are pleasant stops for rest upon that stony way as well as jagged peaks, and the incense of flowers as well as the poison of weeds, and laughter will carry us quicker over a stony road or up a jagged peak than ever sighing did, and to laugh together is the right of youth. Anyway, unless you learn to laugh in Aiken you'll wilt and require a doctor, which will, indeed, be a nice look out for George. You've been diligently and conscientiously building up this barrier between you and George," he said abruptly, "before ever you laid your dead child upon it for coping stone. Your child—that most wonderful gift of God given only to the woman for her woes. No man living has ever entered fully into the unutterable joy and sweetness in a mother's heart. Those that might, dare not. The others cannot. A child—that can make the impossible possible, cure the incurable, join hearts poles apart, restore all the unity to life—to make this ultimate gift of God into an unwomanly instrument of vengeance, a flaming sword to shut your husband out of his paradise! Pretty uses, to be sure, to put child of your body to! Because the child is dead, is it no longer yours and George's?" he asked. "God never made a mother's heart or stilled its cravings to sever at one eternal stroke the insoluble bond that binds mother and child.

"Besides," he resumed, more briskly, "to my mind those doctors were a pair of asses. I doubt if the delay did really much harm. To be comparing doubts in the possible hearing of a mother, to my mind, stamps these fellows! And if it did make this difference, so far as I can see, you are both equally to blame, and that at least simplifies matters. It is a bad blow, an intolerable blow, this death of your first-born, and neither you nor George can worthily fight it apart. You're both of you too young and too foolish, and instead of bearing together this mighty blow, here you are

growing noxious weeds upon the grave of the child. You must be very tired, Joan Winnington, and very crazy, before such an idea could have entered into so simple and sane and sweet a heart.

"Go to bed, dear child, and pray for common sense, and to-morrow—to-morrow, perhaps, I may be fitter to collect my own wits, and prove a more able counsellor. I'm really in most abominable pain. Being weak and foolish, I'll confess to you now, though, what I mightn't in a more lusty moment perhaps.

"That in the silence of your soul you hate and abhor a host of your duties is plain enough, but I'd have you to know that you never hated them so bitterly as I do a host of mine. . . I hate them, you see, with all the vigour and experience of a Bishop. My dear, I must get back to bed, I think. Ha! Yes, do give me a hand up. What strong young shoulders for all their leanness! too strong a deal for morbid imagining. And now we'll ring for my old housekeeper," said he, when he was settled at last before his fire. "She will feel greatly if her mustard poultice prove ineffectual, and I fear that I've dropped it."

"If—if—oh, I'll never forgive myself," cried Joan incoherently.

"My child, don't, I beg of you, turn that tap on. We have already enough to deal with. Your arrival at this hour of night under my nephew's protection, seemed to me a proceeding requiring ecclesiastical supervision, and even a Bishop may have his promptings of duty as well as a woman."

"That—that part never struck me," said Joan, with widening eyes, stung back to a clearer outlook. "Oh! what have I done?"

"Nothing that with a little sense and less words cannot be undone. And now," he said, holding his tortured sides and coughing spasmodically, "I may be going in for some illness—no fault of yours—been on me these three days, only I resented it. I loathe sickness, you see. If I'm worse to-morrow, I positively forbid you," he lifted a shaking forefinger, "to stay and nurse me. Go back to your husband. To begin with, if you stayed you'd only be arousing ill-feeling in my household. The only way in which I've ever disobliged Mrs. Henn, my housekeeper, is in never, so far,

having fallen sick. She's a born nurse. This is *her* hour, and I can't have it spoilt by interlopers. You go to your husband. Do you hear?" he demanded sharply, half deaf by reason of the clashing whirr in his fevered brain.

"I hear," she faltered. She pressed her tired head with her tired hands. "And I think I know now. I—I'll do all you say."

"What did I say, I wonder?" he muttered; "I feel capable of saying anything."

"You've helped me—I think you—you've—saved me. You've cleared everything."

"Wish I could clear my own clotted senses."

"If—if you get really ill, oh! what shall I do?"

"Ask George."

"I've been so dreadful—so wicked."

"You've been nothing of the sort, simply a fool. I knew I put my foot in it. What worms we are that a prick in the side should send common sense flying! Go to George," said he, with laboured breath, "the very instant you can. Rob's an admirable fellow, and—and I wish," he murmured vaguely, "you hadn't built up so unpleasant a God for yourself, but," he added feverishly, "He's better, anyway, than Rob. Oh! go early; go early."

When Mrs. Henn appeared, John Hilary was babbling of modern idol worship and a libelled Heaven. Whereupon, finding delirium appearing so early in the complaint, the experienced woman insisted at once upon having a second opinion.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE Bishop was woefully ill next day. Joan ached to be with him, and her selfishness of the night smote her sore.

The contained resentful wrath of Mrs. Henn inexorably emphasised the discomfort of Joan's state of mind, and proved, we can but hope, a wholesome discipline for the poor sinner.

Before he would permit himself to settle down finally into vain babbling, the Bishop asked the doctor to go at once with a sleeping draught to his young guest, and

gave orders that Mrs. George Winnington should not be disturbed until she herself should ring. He roused himself farther to scribble a note to Rob, and then weakly watched it burn.

"Better not," he murmured, sinking back upon his pillows, "just as well he should meet her after sleep has more or less restored her sanity, and her gentle heart has begun to turn again to its lode-star. An occurrence more strengthening to the moral fibre of both those poor young people, than a thousand ghostly exhortations."

But twice in the night he sat up possessed seemingly with a frantic impulse to get up and dress, till weariness at last threw him.

"A muddled opportunity," he muttered. "The multitudinous experiences of five-and-fifty going to pieces before a burning in your side. A worm isn't in it! Cut a worm into a dozen bits, and he'll wriggle back into a passable coherence."

And then his wits went wandering off into queer by-paths, producing dark sayings which inexpressibly shocked Mrs. Henn. She sat with rigid outstretched fingers, her eyes bursting from her goggles, and thanked the Lord that no one but herself was present.

"After all," said the divine, groaning, "God doesn't get stitches in His side, and so lose His coherence. If I'm laid by, He's there. But she'd prefer me. Poor little thing! Poor wild, little mother!"

Moved by old habit, perhaps, his glazed eyes sought after an audience.

"Odd, Mrs. Henn, isn't it? To prefer a poor poulticed bishop to a great God? Such a poor thing of a bishop, too," he murmured, gazing up in her face of deprecation, "that even his housekeeper forgets her upbringing and treats him like a baby."

"And—then, and then—to—to be expecting a girl with a dead baby—to—to keep her wits. That sort goeth not forth with poultices, eh! Mrs. Henn?"

It was half an hour before the prescribed moment for his sleeping draught, but Mrs. Henn insisted then and there upon his swallowing it.

She had her reward; there came method into the bishop's madness.

He now went in and out of curates in a reassuring way, mixing them up after an odd, yet convincing fashion, with other Church abuses.

When Joan awoke at ten o'clock, the pendulum in her head only slightly swung. It hurt less. Things were clearing. The world and George were no longer one vast horrifying blur. Everything was full of sorrow, indeed, but she could see her way in the darkness.

Having bent her head before the judgment stool of Mrs. Henn, she went down to meet Rob.

With returning sanity, came also self-consciousness. She now saw him rather more through George's eyes. This interfered somehow with his helpfulness and her dauntless demand.

After some time he was a friend to keep proudly for ever. As he came to her, furtively to search her face and gather bitterness, her heart swelled with gratitude and affection.

Her behaviour of the day before, however she may have thought, have felt, was still a marvel to her—must remain for ever amongst the marvels, but that it should be Rob and no lesser man—and no woman at all—who had been witness to her disorder, was her one and only consolation.

Joan's notions of friendship were simple and mighty, but calculated to try the reins of a man, who like Heron was so much more than friend and so much less.

His end had come, so he now plainly discovered.

"But how am I to begin to thank you?" cried she, giving him both her hands. "If you hadn't been so good—so good. If you hadn't been so patient and wise—and brought me to the Bishop, I—I wonder what would have happened. I—I'm afraid even to wonder. I can't remember—quite—it's like a dreadful dream—I think I was mad. Don't you think I must have been mad?" She slightly shuddered. "I'm glad; oh! I'm glad yesterday is past. But now—now I'm growing sane, I think—but truly I am—and you stand—and look hopeless."

Rob felt conscientiously about after words and a cheerful expression, but neither came.

Joan's face as it watched him, was amazingly sweet and pleading, her attitude, leaning towards him eagerly, her hands clasping one of his, a moving one.

George, to be sure, found it a very peculiarly moving

one, as having gently opened the door, he stood transfixed upon the threshold.

"The third time," said some miserable, lurking devil in George's ear. The same nimble fiend repeated the remark in Heron's.

There was no going back this time, however, for George, and as he crossed the room to his wife, his face looked most extraordinarily like his father's.

He would not judge at all; so his reason kept beating into him—not at all. He would wait and just be sorry—sorry—sorry for his wife.

While she spoke to Heron there had been no earthly reason why Joan should blush. *He* understood everything. He had understood it all through. He had been with her. Oh! he would know.

But here was another matter altogether.

She had outraged George. She had failed him. Her folly had been incredible, and even now—even now—the ice of death that parted them had not quite thawed. And torn with grief, Joan was still in an exaggerated mood. She faltered, flushed, and trembled.

"One can hardly wonder," thought George bitterly.

"She's madder than ever," groaned Heron.

"Breakfast isn't up," he said at last, lightly; "I'll go and see if they'll let me in now to see the Bishop."

George started. Face to face with Joan; unendurable! intolerable! That must wait. He wasn't ready.

The prosaic business of breakfast seemed the one defence left him against himself, Joan, God, all things.

"But see, it's here all right—except for the coffee," he said. "Suppose we have it at once."

By the signs of iron control in the man's face, Rob saw well enough that breakfast was the one single refuge left the three of them.

Simultaneously each man moved to set Joan's chair at the proper angle. But Heron was the nearer of the two and George drew back. Joan looked oddly from one man to the other.

To be guilty before George, guilty. For the very first time in her life ashamed, remorseful, and—still—still with all her trying, afraid of George's touch, and of his kiss!

It was so strange, so amazing! The pendulum began in Joan's head again, and her heart sickeningly jerked.

She could hardly see to pour out the coffee, the cups and things got all mixed up.

George noticed every symptom. His normal power of happy detachment had forsaken him. His eyes were avid for signs. But after a masterly fashion he controlled himself. To Rob's anxious, distracted mind, there was a certain fiendishness in the calm way in which George helped his wife to bacon.

"This new vice plainly is as much as he can manage," thought Rob, more used to sin. "If the truth were known I daresay he's been holding a ghostly vigil all night before it, the infernal thing getting its fangs all the time into him. Better have gone to sleep and dreamed of his wife's face."

"I rather hoped you'd get the letter in time to come last night," said Rob, cutting bread. George started.

"What letter?"

"The one I sent by Hall, telling you——"

"I got no letter. The landlord of the Inn came up and told us that you had both gone—where he did not know. Who wrote the letter?"

"Why naturally I did, and had two minutes to write it in. You don't quite grasp, I fancy, how very ill Mrs. Winnington was last night. She was quite unfit to travel alone. I'm glad," said he boldly, "that I happened to be with her."

A light shone suddenly into the darkness that beset Joan, her heavy eyes were starry again.

"Oh! George, then you just guessed I'd be here."

"No," said George, very quietly, "Miss Rebecca guessed."

Joan winced as though he had struck her.

George, Rob now perceived, was helping the unfortunate child to honey.

"I felt ill yesterday, dreadfully ill," she said. "But I'm nearly well to-day. I—I'm ready for anything."

"That's right," said her husband, his eyes on his plate.

"Will this devilish meal ever come to an end?" thought Rob, eyeing a mass of marmalade wherewith in his absent-mindedness he had cumbered his own plate. "Oh, well!"

he reflected practically, "one can make short work of this."

"And after all," he thought, as he went up the stairs, "my leaving the coast clear now is only to change one torture for another for her. However, I'm better out of it, any way. Sort of thing, this, that calls for a special invitation."

He looked sorrowfully at the uneven rise and fall of the Bishop's delicate nostrils; he listened to his moaning breaths; shivered at the horrid spasms of pain that rent him. The beautiful, kind voice, cracked and shrill, smote him hard.

"The only man that might be of any real use," thought Rob, "laid by the heels."

He dearly loved the sick man, but his thoughts soon flew back to the woman. "We could have been so happy together, my dear, and given folly to play with you'd have learnt wisdom royally; you'd never any way have been driven to the insanity of last night. Oh, my dear, my dear, my dear," he said, "the way of you is joy. I wonder if you'll ever buckle down to the other way, and how? It's a fence, I fear, that will spill an untrained rider—plenty of hand, poor Joan, poor Joan, but no seat—and—and it takes time to learn."

Directly Rob had gone Joan's thin, childish hand went out to seize the lapel of George's coat, but she looked more guilty than ever. She flushed and stammered and that after a fashion which cut George like a two-edged sword. Her eyes fell, she piteously quivered. With a hunted look she clung to him.

She had also clung to Heron.

But her gentleness disarmed George. What, moreover, was a man to do—to say?

To feel harshly was torture enough, but to act harshly to a creature so slight, so lovely, so broken with grief, it was impossible to George. He tenderly soothed her, but he looked away.

"I've been mad," she cried, "I've been quite, quite mad. I was so tired and suddenly—oh, George! suddenly the baby came between us. I must have been mad—for yesterday, it seemed to be for ever—I didn't think I could have come back to you again!"

For an eternal instant George paused. "What led you to alter your intention?" he then said.

She flushed miserably and hid her face.

"Something Captain Heron said—afterwards the Bishop. Oh! he was very wise, he always is."

Shaken, benumbed, shocked, yet what could a man do but stroke her?

"Rob was like a city of refuge," she proceeded. "I couldn't have gone to any one else. I was too stupid even to think of the Bishop."

"That then was an afterthought—and his?" George's hands unconsciously ceased to stroke.

"I was mad, don't you see? He had to think of *everything*. I—I had to get away—I knew—I knew he'd understand me perfectly—I had cause to know—in a way——" She paused. "But—I can't tell you that now—not now—in a sort of way it's *his* secret."

His secret! His secret! The words were burning George's brain. Had she been telling Rob then of this perfect understanding as they stood together under the trees. His secret! Rob's! Not to be told to him—her husband!

It wasn't much, it wasn't much, but to George's tortured senses the little occasion held infinity.

It was the end of the old loving, tried things, the beginning of new, untried, repellant ones. The greatness and the glory had of a sudden slipped from their lives—their Life—rather it had been one life, grand, indissoluble, complete. And what a life to break! But what a life to break! There was no harm done, possibly no harm thought. Everything would go on just the same, but with—oh! what a difference!

In a moment life had grown lonely, sordid.

To be forgiving Joan—forgiving Joan! This was the first step to take; it struck him as incredible.

The mere thought of it suffocated the obstinate heart of George, his touch upon his wife grew unconsciously hard. She shrank a little from it. He noticed this too. Had she perhaps not shrunk from Heron's?

Every second brought with it another thought more revolting, more despicable than the last.

"The Bishop made me see my wickedness," she said,

"what a fool I'd been—my blindness. Captain Heron—oh! he was very good."

All through she had carefully avoided, whenever possible, mentioning Heron's name. Joan was very loyal, bitterly reflected Joan's husband.

Joan, however, trembled and shook; she wanted to tell George everything. How it had happened. How she had gone mad. But the confusion in thought and word was all coming back again, and she was so tired. He would surely understand without explaining.

"George! you do understand?" she feebly pleaded.

"Yes, dear," said George, after a moment's pause, "I understand. I think—I think you'd better lie down," he added.

"No—will you take me home to Aiken? The Bishop said I must go—and Mrs. Henn doesn't want me here. And if once I lay down—oh! George—take me home."

So he took her home, and in spite of the sleeping draught the brain trouble did come on. For days she lay in feverish semi-consciousness. But she raved in a general sort of way about her baby, and her journey to reach him. What she said of Heron was perhaps suggestive to a warped mind, and she left George clean out.

Trust a delirious woman to complicate an already unpromising situation!

There was little danger, it seemed, in the illness to her bodily, but mentally she needed solicitous care.

She was nervous, the doctor decided. She had suffered greatly. The less comment made upon the melancholy past, the better. She must not be encouraged to dwell upon her grief. She must gradually return to her normal life. In work lies salvation.

"Mrs. Winnington is a woman who glorifies work." Thus spake the doctor to the anxious husband.

So somehow the subject of Heron and that secret of his was never touched upon by husband or wife.

Joan rose from her bed with a strange, mute horror of those unutterable days of despair.

George had a natural diffidence in approaching them.

And so his unheeded wound festered on quietly in his heart under all its wrappings, and the jealousy that had turned his father's rollicking life into a howling wilder-

ness of scandal fastened upon George, and grew like a cancer.

And Joan returned, rather silently, to her childless life.

It was madness, George felt assured, that had fallen upon Joan, but it was madness that might return. This was the knife in her husband's side. At any moment it might return.

His calm and perfect mastery of himself had now forsaken George. In and out of church did this evil thought pursue him. It poisoned prayer and exhortation; it hardened psalm and hymn; it dogged his steps. It was the devil that night and day hung upon this poor saint's heels. He now saw but the thickness of gloom where a great light had shone. The waters had indeed gone over George. Even the arrogance of the Church Militant would seem to have forsaken him.

He could shoulder the world out of his path, this foolish man, it seemed, but not the meanest of all the passions.

In the day sometimes he might vanquish it—such as George cannot live without a little victory—but at night it arose, a giant refreshed. He was eternally facing, and fighting, and was often now tired.

This evil thing came also between him and his great work. And as an inspiration the virtue had gone out of Joan.

This was the bitterest drop in all the bitter cup. Night after night did he now watch Joan make her little preparations.

The increase of solicitude in her every action, the stabbing little deprecations in look and manner were an added torment to George. For indeed this new elusive thing that had come between her and him filled her with perplexed anxiety and to overcome it was her one desire, so she tried all things. She had patiently, steadily, absorbedly pushed the other obstacle, that bred of her own bitter grief and madness aside, but this she could not move. It grew, it grew, it seemed to dull her understanding and stand in the way of all her outlooks. And she had grown a little afraid of questions. More than once George had evaded them, and in her quiet way she was a proud creature who could not brook rebuff.

And so the barren evenings dragged on impotently.

George wrote, and tore up, he wrote, and wrote, and wrote, but conception, thought, idea lay unresponsive in the darkness, and such as through pain and pang at last struggled to the light were still-born. One by one his precious gifts forsook him and the face of God was hidden from George.

The meekness inseparable from the spectacle of a woman neatly sewing, which formerly had been to him a song without words—strength made perfect in weakness—the sweetness of womanhood suggestive of Home, self-sacrifice, and the laughter of children—now annoyed and disturbed George. “A woman who sews will think,” thought he, and of what was she thinking?

Her face varied.

She was no longer absorbed in the Great Work. How could she be, since she had ceased to be its inspiration? She did not always think of their dead child. He knew always when she did, and then his heart melted. He would then have helped and consoled her, had he the power. But there had fallen a veil between them, and he could not lift it; he had lost the way. Joan must grieve alone and think alone. She must—possibly she must—overcome alone. For Joan, he knew, would never suffer evil gladly—but that was her part—not his!

George had lost the way to many a thing.

His enthusiasms had left him. His hopes had all grown dim. All he could do now was to get through the work given him to do, tirelessly, fiercely, well. But he had no longer great and gallant thoughts wherewith to exorcise either the devil or Heron. No manna fresh from Heaven as in the old days to give away to every human soul that came to him. He strove without ceasing to reach again the heights whence he had fallen, but with the poison of asps in his veins what can a man do? Striving to wrestle with God he will find himself grasping a shadow.

The soldier in George might in the end have conquered, had not the self-torturing poet one night brought him to extremities.

Distracted by the incoherence of beauty that kept slipping through his fingers, flashing past his eyes, dazzled and balked, he glanced at Joan's attentive, solicitous face, so near and yet worlds apart, and it oddly confounded him.

The consuming degradation of his state of mind, his disorder—his fall, struck him like a felling blow. He was ashamed before her. Gently, kindly—almost tenderly in his agony—and yet peremptorily, he told Joan that she looked worn out and had better go to bed.

Joan stared with stupefaction.

He was cutting her out of his work then—out of their creation—their only child now, since Jasper was dead. So long as their lives had gone on upon the old lines Joan had hoped that the old, sweet ways would one day return, but this was an earthquake in their path. A great gulf—she on one side, George on the other. Their one bridge was gone, their boats burned. This was the end of hope.

It seemed so odd, so impossible.

She wondered if George were George, if she were herself. If the room were going round, or only her head, but she quietly took up her work and went.

It was after this night that in her desolation Joan's heart turned at last to the poor of God, and she forgot their smell. She went out humbly, yearningly, eagerly, to pour upon them in full measure, flowing over, all that until now she had grudgingly bestowed, and in a wistful, apologetic way that pleased and comforted those bodies of grime and woe, she sought diligently for the alchemy of healing which has lain from everlasting hidden in every human touch.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AND so in ridiculous loneliness the two went their ways.

Joan drearily wondered what it all meant, and in what manner she had now failed George.

George thought chiefly of Joan's head upon Heron's arm.

The abject suspicion, moreover, that divided him from his wife drew George more closely to his father, in whose presence Joan had suddenly grown shy. George took her place for the moment, and in the surprise and exquisite pleasure of it the old man, perhaps, somewhat neglected Joan.

What had at last melted the heart of George towards his erring parent was his new and more intimate knowledge of

sin, and of the incredible pain of it. Thus, what in the day of his pride had been a mystery, became now in his day of degradation, only too hideously patent.

Himself armed at a thousand points, yet with fiends gnawing at his vitals, what could he have expected? how dared he to judge?

With his paucity of channels and an eighteenth century outlook, the old Squire could hardly have done otherwise than take to drink, so George now decided, as one by one his deadened sympathies awoke.

It struck him that in this matter he had been an arrant prig, and that never had he helped his father.

His efforts at reparation were thus diffident and rather boyish, and showed George in a fresh and charming light.

So it was after all natural enough that the old father should desire to get this phase through alone with his new-found son.

But it seemed to little Joan as though still another door were being shut in her face.

Miss Rebecca, who had caught a wicked cold the night she had gone forth to meet Joan, was in Bath, seeing what the waters would do for her aching limbs.

The Bishop was slowly recovering at Mentone, Captain Heron kept conscientiously in the distance, and so Joan quietly and uninterruptedly got thin and white.

George saw the change with a tortured heart, and thought ragingly of Heron.

When his gratified eyes drew sometimes away from George, the Squire also saw it, and thought sadly of the child.

The curates saw it, but being chronically thin and white themselves, they had become hardened to the state, and put it down in mournful silence to Aiken and the Profession.

To be one with George in all things had often been hard for Joan, and more often dull. But to be cast out of his best thoughts was despair.

The keen airs of the hills had gripped her breath, but the dead ones of the valley suffocated her, and every day she got more tired. So tired at last did she get that she grew to be afraid of her tiredness.

It was like a treacherous foe that implacably tracked her—that some day might trick her, and against whom she had no defence, so useless had she become, so impotent.

For a time she fought sturdily against the insidious fatigue, but one day it suddenly struck her that the tiredness after all didn't much matter. She was now absolutely indispensable to no one, and she hindered George.

And George's father and the others—she had grown lonely in the midst of them.

It was all very odd and very confusing, and why she could not guess, but it was she also who had brought the Poem to a standstill, who was sapping the quality in the sermons, who instead of trimming had quenched George's lamps.

For no glimmer of deterioration in George could elude such love as Joan's.

Plainly, oh, plainly, she was a failure.

Possibly her failure had something to do with her late revolt, her worldly desires, her carnal heart. She was much too tired, however, to go back now to thresh these things out. Besides, they had left her—these wicked desires. Now she rather liked dullness, and she dearly loved the poor, but, after all, they had George and the curates, the poor could quite easily spare her. Which shows, taken altogether, that Joan's pride was going the melancholy way of her fortitude and her strength; that she was very far gone, in short, upon the wretched road to ruin.

One day, after a reasonable period, Rob Heron ordered his manners, chastened his mind, and paid the riven pair a visit. Joan's looks appalled him. But it was the indefinable alteration in George, his amazing likeness to his father, subdued—clearly enough, and with bloody sweat, no doubt—to the requirements of his cloth and his calling, but there notwithstanding, for seeing eyes to see, that gave Rob his clues.

The kindness of George to his wife was incomparable, more solicitous even than of yore, more alert, for now there was duty in it. It was no longer as unconscious as his breathing.

By the time the visit was over, Rob had got very near to the truth.

But what to do with it was the question.

Truth in some cases may prove but a scurvy possession. And this particular truth was a dagger in Heron's side.

After a brief period of raging scorn his natural sense of justice, however, came to his aid. With a wry mouth he went categorically over the various phases of the abominable business, with the result that, in his opinion, George had some reason upon his side. Also that to George was due an explanation—from some one.

Yet who can explain away an attitude, or the reasons that made it pardonable, possible, explicable? Who can explain the ways of a woman stark, staring mad, still less her looks?

Rob was smitten with a profound and afflicting conviction that in order to spare George for the demands of the Higher Life Joan herself had omitted to explain in detail—anything, leaving the matter forsooth to the intelligence of her husband.

"Little she knows of a man's intelligence when he has sight to confound it!" thought Captain Heron moodily.

"There's nothing left," he told himself later, "but to have the thing out with the man from beginning to end, and with that Winnington blood in him it will be a facer. But I'll take the first opportunity, anyway."

Before seizing his opportunity, however, Rob ventured upon another visit to the Vicarage, to find chaos afoot.

Joan was ill. George had been away for some days helping in three missions, and had no settled place of abode. Post-cards written in trains were the sole clues to his rapidly changing tracks.

Joan had come in that morning only just a little whiter than usual, the servants said. It was, however, the little atom of whiteness too much, for Mrs. George Winnington sat down idle at last, dictated one telegram to the Squire and one to Miss Rebecca—who had come back the day before—but told them on no account to disturb their master, and then with a curious little laugh, she asked the maids to put her to bed.

"It's so foolish," said she. "I'm really only tired; but I can't sit up any longer, or do one thing more."

For weeks there had been a plague of influenza in Aiken, and Joan's hands had been full. It had been an untold comfort to tire herself out for some one who couldn't spare her, and she had done it thoroughly.

She had not been feeling well of late, so the horrid sensa-

tions of heat and cold and giddiness that seemed to pursue her she put down to the usual tiredness, and the cough was, of course, the result of the river fog. Each of the five curates had generally a cough just like it. So she had said nothing to anyone, but had just gone on.

She knew that her people would miss her dreadfully, and she could not sit alone in her lonely house.

The doctors said that Mrs. Winnington had apparently got through all the violent stages of influenza about in the Parish. It was the after-weakness from which she was now suffering.

"There's no danger, none whatever," the Squire protested, fear looking out of both his eyes. "She takes her nourishment; she has no pain. It's fatigue, and nothing more. And in this confounded air, you know—and her child dead, and—and——"

"The communion of saints," suggested Heron.

"What the devil——"

"Now Mr. Winnington," said Rob, "look here, silence is all very well, but some things want brutal speech. There's more here than influenza. She's an amazing, old-fashioned creature, Mrs. George Winnington, for all her youth: and parasitical by nature and training, and being deprived of her natural support she's gone to pieces. I happen to know this——"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that George is as jealous as the devil of me—and with some cause."

"What—what——?"

"Don't excite yourself, precious little hope of any consolation for *me* in the beastly business. By a piece of clumsiness upon my part, coupled with fate, I daresay, and knowledge—a woman who loves and is loved knows the thing when she sees it—she found out that I'd be glad enough to give very life and soul for her. And when she went mad, she turned to me. It was all simple and frank and exceedingly insane, but unfortunately George saw just enough to set him off—and the Winningtons, I take it, have strong passions."

"Good God, man! go on."

"Do you know nothing?"

"Except that there's the devil of a mess somewhere."

"From the moment your letter came, it seems she had a wild idea that the child was very ill. Dr. Baker told her the day before he died that the little chap, if ever he got ill, would need stimulant. You'll remember you were always against giving stimulants to children, and she knew it. I say, sir, sit down, won't you. The thought got on her brain, but she couldn't disturb George. He was in torment about some fellow's soul, and some flaw in one of his own arguments. So the poor little thing took over some duty for him out of the beat of the curates, it would seem, while he solved his doubts, and—so lost her train.

"And then those two unaccountable idiots of doctors confessed to each other that if given in time the brandy would have saved him. She heard them jabbering, and it turned her mad; she was morbid before, poor child. She saw the child's murderer in George, and fairly ran away from him. Even before she went, though, the poison was working in George; he saw—he happened to see the poor frenzied girl turning for help to me. No man could stand it—George certainly could not. You know about our mad jaunt and the Bishop? But even after that she was thanking me in her absolutely frank, natural way—good God! you know her!—but George came in: you can't explain that sort of thing off-hand, and I'll take my oath she's never gone through it with him. It's not struck her. The damned doubt has come between the two of them, and—you can't expect a parasite to stand up to the weather without its tree. She's in the dust now—trailing. But we can't spare either her or her weakness—it's her weakness, after all, that inspires our strength. God! we can't spare her.

"I'm off now," he hurriedly concluded, "to catch George before he gets here and explain."

"Good God!" said Jasper; "good God!"

"Mrs. George trusts me," said Heron softly, "tell her I'm gone for George."

Jasper nodded, Heron paused for a minute to look, quick with compassion, at the great tragic figure, his ruddy face livid.

"The sins of the father," muttered the old man, when Rob had gone.

"And George, poor lad, a saint, and jealousy ravaging in virgin soil! Oh, God! And I not to see the thing. Oh! we're two fools together, my son and I. And between us our Joan is dying."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ARMED with the three telegrams which George had missed, Heron found his man at last making a cross-country short-cut from one Service to another. His back as he trudged up the hill struck Rob as looking unnecessarily tired. There was visible degeneration going on in the man.

"Your best station," said Rob, when George had read the message, duplicated in each telegram, "is Haslope. There's time and half an hour to spare. I'll walk across with you."

"But pray—don't trouble," said George, quickly.

"I'm afraid I must," said Rob bluntly, "I have something to say to you. Truth is an unpleasant weapon at the best of times. When a man is staggering under a blow there's a sort of cowardice in its use, but all the same it's got to be spoken. We were once friends, George," he went on in a quiet monotone, "you and I. We were intended by Nature, and reason, and circumstances to be friends, but we've fallen apart, divided as usual by a woman—and such a woman! Too good surely for uses so vulgar——"

"This is hardly the time——"

"It's unfortunately the only time. Your mind, it seems, is poisoned with jealousy of your wife and me. Put into words the thing seems rather brutal, don't you think, as applied to a woman like your wife?" He paused to collect himself. It was a horrid grind. He would have been glad even if George would swear, but George was too confounded, too shocked and numb for words of any sort or degree. "Any way, it's a fact," said Rob. "You can't deny it. And so far as I can see you've been acting accordin'——"

"I——"

"I won't say you've ill-treated your wife—or sworn at her," said Rob, with an angry shrug. "But in the processes of your self-control you've, so far as I can gather, broken her heart. She's not a strong, self-reliant modern—your wife. She's chock-full of sweet, old-fashioned weaknesses. Her strength is of the strength of those dead women who've been the mothers of brave men for all the generations, and have kept us on our feet before modern improvements came in. Of course, they'd live or die at any moment for their love or their religion, those women, and always be ready to fight for their children—but torn suddenly from their supports it's easy betting that they'd do foolishly—as Mrs. George is doing now——"

"Say out at once what you mean," said George, stern and white, his eyes flaming.

"Good God, are you mad too? Do you think I mean to imply that the woman who loves you a damn sight more than you deserve—has tripped in my direction? Her affection for me is about as sentimental as her cousinly duty towards Miss Rebecca, but you see I happen to love your wife, and love opens the eyes—jealousy, on the contrary, shuts 'em. The poor little thing is dying of loneliness and the tyranny of priest-craft, and it's you who've killed her."

"Heron——"

"Let me get this over, for God's sake! Do you know anything of that night, of what led to the madness?"

"Tell me what you know," said George, fiercely.

So he told him, sparing nothing.

"Women born to be inspirers of great poems," he said at last, with bitter cruelty, "have grovelling sensations, unknown to those of the heroic mould, born to wield hockey sticks. That type, possessed by one ungovernable impulse to go to the child, would have gone and left *you* to the devil. *She* stayed—and later on naturally, considering her build and her state of health, looking upon you as the child's murderer, she went mad. She likes me and I love her, and so she turned to me. We got no further than the Bishop's, any way. But even if we'd gone to the world's end, she was still yours, and I the dog under her table,

picking up crumbs, and, by God, you ought to have known it. And now for so slight a cause she's dying. You must kill a woman to test her love, it seems."

"Don't say any more," said George, in a low, hollow voice. "I see it——"

"Do you? I doubt it."

"You love her," said George, with sudden passion. "Suppose you multiply your love a thousand-fold, assume that she belongs to you—*you*, and then see her by chance with her head upon—another man's arm."

"Ah! 'Twas unfortunate that," said Rob generously. "It was an infernal pity. Her head was there because—those women for whom men make willing fools of themselves—you and I, for example—are parasitic, you know—and unless they play games their tendrils don't make wood—and when thrown in the dust those tendrils will go out blindly after help—to lift them up. I was with her all through. I understood, in short, and was a trustworthy support—her impulses are always right—that's how it happened. It was folly. But it's the folly that best suits our constitutions. You never met a living man, I swear, who'd die—or live either—for a feminine hockey-stick. He might exist with her—at intervals."

George's face was stone.

"Man, have you no pity for me?" said Rob at last, hoarsely. "Is a Christian of bowels a lost tradition? Do you want me to begin to think that it's a pity after all that she did meet you first? I've never thought that yet, by God, I haven't. I've believed in you with the best of them. If I hadn't—well—if I hadn't," he paused, "that wouldn't have altered your wife—I'd have done just as I have done, because—why—because there was nothing else for me to do? Well, good-bye. I haven't, to my knowledge, any more pertinent remarks to make."

He nodded, and turned up the hill again. George stood still for an instant, then he followed him.

"Yours is the better love of the two," he said in a low, stricken voice. "You never doubted her. If—if we get her back I—I'll be even with you some day." He half turned, then turned again. "God help you," he cried. "What will *you* do?"

"I shall command my regiment in time, I hope. Mean-

while I shall love your wife. I've bought sorrow and am quite ready to pay the price."

The men looked queerly at one another, then turned in silence and went each his way.

Meanwhile Joan upon her tired feet, having got over the pains and the incredible discomforts of her complaint up and down the lanes and in and out the courts of Aiken, had now only to wrestle painlessly with the resultant fatigue.

This gathered and grew.

There is a terrible intelligence in the painless approaches to death; Joan was not so tired but that she could, a little laboriously, perhaps, and in sections—look things round. And so death left her no single illusion in regard to life.

She had tried to see things from every point of view till she was too tired at last to stand any longer upright, and she had seen no hope anywhere.

She could see none now. She had failed George.

She was too small plainly for heights, and George after all could not dwindle to meet her size. She would hate to see him even stoop, it could but emphasize her ineffectuality.

Faint notions of celibacy for the Clergy would go jerking about her brain, but these grew grotesque and offended her, so incontinently she cast them out.

And to rest, to rest for ever seemed nice.

One can't be lonely if one is resting in a confused sort of dream, not longing, longing, longing till one aches. Sorrow and pain are so difficult to bear alone.

Everything was altering with Joan; the sharp lines were all broken; the keenness in all things gone. As she watched them all about her like trees walking—odd trees full of anguish and dismay—she felt that she, too, should have been full of this poignant sorrow, but only a faint aloof interest awoke in her.

She saw everything from some strange far-away in which she floated, cold and quiet.

Nothing escaped her, but nothing any longer moved her. That was all past. She had done with that part. She had just failed, that was all, and was too tired to begin again.

Even with George it had always been dreadfully diffi-

cult to be good—without him—but she couldn't attempt to think of it—not just now.

Of course, latterly her heart had sprung to the poor, and suddenly her senses had forgotten all their awfulness. But no thanks to her, after all. The poor had come when she could no longer do without them, it was really none of her doing. It could hardly, indeed, be called proper goodness.

If it had been, surely George would have noticed it.

At this thought she moved restlessly.

If George had noticed she might not have got so tired.

After that she struggled even less than before against the load of oblivion which was weighing each moment more heavily upon her.

For the selfishness of death is a mighty and conscious selfishness.

She saw Beatrice shaken, trembling, throw a great bunch of red roses, which with some new gentle intention she had brought with her, upon the bed. She felt her tears upon her hands. She heard Billy whimpering hoarsely of horses, and riding, and fresh air, and bucking up. His tears fell upon her face.

Even Cora and her soldier stood over her whitely and pleaded.

They were all sorry. How sorry they all were!

And yet she had failed George. It seemed odd they should all be so sorry.

When nothing mattered in the whole wide world now but George. Nothing in the whole wide world does matter in the least but love, that sort of love—and one other, she confusedly thought, but she was too tired now to think of this other; it was too big. She could only remember the sort it was quite impossible to live without.

As the tears fell upon her soft and warm, she knew her friends were kind and would have helped her. She smiled gratefully, but compared with what she had missed—oh! but—one couldn't even try to compare.

* * * * *

The squire was sitting beside the fire, his white head

fallen upon his breast, a voiceless picture of despair, when Miss Rebecca bore suddenly down upon him.

"Go up, Jasper," said she hoarsely, "I've turned them all out. If anything will recall her to a sense of her duty it will be the sight of you!"

"You've found her out too, have you?" he asked huskily, not daring to meet her eyes. "It's too confoundedly awful, Rebecca."

"You've seen with your own eyes into the uttermost depths of sorrow—and if you ever break loose again"—short sobs broke Rebecca's stout voice—"if you ever break loose again, God may forgive you, Jasper—the King of kings can forgive all things, it's his royal prerogative—but I'm blessed if I will."

"I'll drink like a fish, woman," he thundered, below his breath, "and we'll all go to pieces, the lot of us. She holds us all in the hollow of her hand."

"Too human to die," moaned Miss Rebecca—"too human. But at least," she added fiercely, "she'll make Heaven habitable to the vulgarest sinner. But little Joan!" she wailed, "Little Joan! to treat us like this—to slip from our arms and leave life cold!"

The old man stood up heavily and looked down upon her.

And then Rebecca's despair became all at once Jasper's opportunity. He lifted himself to his magnificent height and spoke with confidence. "She's not dead yet, my girl," he said softly. "She's got *your* blood in her veins. This fact seems to have slipped our minds. I'll try to rouse this good blood in the girl."

But Rebecca worn, reckless, and in anguish, was beyond consolation.

"The most consistent woman I have ever met," she sobbed. "Her death will be the one touch necessary to turn George from a budding bishop into a Man."

"My dear, good Rebecca, don't give way to hysteria, there's a good deal of sanity still about Providence," explained Jasper.

"Providence! Then this vagary is the human sacrifice possibly necessary to the making of a god."

"Oh, Rebecca, Rebecca, you to give in and then to be blaming the child!"

When the Squire reached Joan's room Beatrice, he found, had slipped back, and was entreating Joan in broken words.

Joan listened as one who has heard all the arguments before, but wishes to be courteous.

It was an abominable attitude. The Squire shuddered, his arguments seemed all to melt and vanish. He gathered himself together, and with a nod dismissed Beatrice.

And then a curious flickering smile about Joan's lips recalled his scattered wits.

"Indifference has sent her heart asleep," he cried to his soul, "and—George—as likely as not—preaching!"

"Now, Joan," he said sharply, "I see your little game. You must chuck it, girl, and live."

At the sound of the rich, deep voice, Joan struggled for a second with the deadly mist in which she lay, then she opened her eyes.

"That's better," said Jasper, "now listen. Don't you see, my girl, that—that you're conducting yourself in short like a damned Hindoo, and with the blood of Rebecca Westcar in your veins?" He paused. Joan made a distinct effort to clear the blurred air, to beat her way out of the confusion. Looking at George's father seemed to help her a little.

"I'm—I'm afraid," she slowly said, after a long pause.

"Afraid? A girl who can love like you? That's a lie, my girl, and you know it. You're mawkish with disease and over fatigue, that's what you are. It's a common, low sort of thing, don't you see, to be dying in this sort of way? It's underbred—shouldn't have expected it of you. Love has overcome a lot since the world started, can't it overcome the—the boredom of a trade?"

She visibly started. Her eyes widened. Old centres were being touched in her brain.

There had been so full a sympathy between her and George's father, so even an understanding that he was slowly growing worth while again.

"Do you understand, child?" he softly asked, forcing the tears back behind his eyes.

"I—I understand. But I've got to—to like the poor. I—I truly have, and I don't mind dulness—but—I think I'm—rather in the way——"

"Look here, my girl, beware of hysteria, and let me explain matters. You've had a sorrowful time of it—and perhaps you did go crazy a bit—generally play the fool, you know. In short, George—has for weeks past been as jealous of you and Rob Heron as the very devil. And in repenting him of his fatuous sins, so far as I can see, he's been letting the wife he adores go all to pieces. In George's way? Why, God bless my soul, you're the pivot upon which he turns. Buck up and get well, Joan Winington, and don't be disgracing the blood you come of. We can't spare you, my girl, any of us, but George least of all. Do you want to spoil a career? Do you want to nip the best bishop the Church has produced in the bud? George was an honest man—fool or not—and his goal was great before this worm of jealousy began on him. The one decent thing left you to do is to get well, to bring George to his senses, and refute a foul calumny upon both of you. This thing you're after now affects us all. To die because a man makes an arrant ass of himself—there's something craven in the thing—unworthy, depraved. And have you no thought for me—and we such friends? If you die in this unnecessary way, I'll never lift up my head again. For 'tis I and mine who are responsible for this curse in the boy's blood. But if my sins have fallen upon George's head so, thank Heaven, has my constitution. He can overcome his infernal sins. If, however, the sins and the constitution only combine to do to death my little daughter-in-law—God, girl! can't you see the end of it?" In Joan's eyes there was slowly growing the old, grave, attentive look. Jasper paused. For one moment his face was uplifted to Heaven, the next it toppled to Hell.

"Joan," he said hoarsely, "If you buck up and live, I'll never touch another drop of whiskey, I give you my solemn oath, I won't. I'll be a—a damned teetotaller to the end of my miserable existence. It's a sporting offer, girl—and George will be here in ten minutes. The train's in. And here's some one with some slop for you," he said feebly, "drink it and buck up."

"Are you going to stay?" he asked tenderly, when Beatrice had gone.

"Things—things are coming back," she said, with a faint smile.

"Well," faltered Miss Rebecca, when two minutes later Jasper threw himself into a chair beside her.

"I've done it, I believe," he muttered. "She's going to buck up and if George is still an ass, may God forgive me. Jealous of *her*—of *her*. It's kicking the fellow wants, not prayer."

"Oh!" cried Rebecca. "He can purge himself, I suppose," she added sharply.

"Purge himself! It's that Tommy rot that has done it. While he was off on the purging racket she was thrust out in the cold. I don't condemn the fellow," he said, relenting, "not wholly. The thing presents difficulties. You can't be repenting of a jealous mind, Rebecca, with your wife hanging on to your heels. It's a complicated passion," he explained mournfully, "full of shoals and pitfalls. No one but he who has suffered can presume in such a case to judge. I'm—infernally sorry for the young fool."

"He's in the hall," she cried, "go out to him."

"He's had his conscience and the other man at him already," said Jasper over his shoulder, "and neither will I spare him, so help me God!"

But when he saw George he bent his head and laid his hand in silence upon the boy's shoulder.

"Ah! What can you know?" said George, huskily. "You've not lived with Joan, you've not killed her."

"Now that's wholesome. Go up, boy! bare your soul, show her what it wasn't seemly for me to divulge. Tell her of your meanness, your foul doubts, your cruelty. Let her *see* the thing—oh! my son, as you and I see it. Shock her back to life and a sense of her own awful impotence, of her inaccessible heights above the like of us. Show her the weakness of a—a damned saint, and the strength of a poor little sinner."

She was faltering still, her hand upon the latch when George came to her, but her eyes had cleared, and the words of George's father were astir within her.

A dawn of new desire arose upon her heart, but she feared greatly. And no man can in a moment lay bare a

shameful soul, or spur back to life a heart that has lost grip of it.

Days of anguish with seconds of joy, the birth and death of many a hope had to be fared through before any heart in that sad household came back to its normal beating. But all the time that George was drawing his wife back from the dreadful door, her hand was growing used again to his.

"My beloved! Oh, my beloved! don't you see? Don't you understand?" said George one day, when what he had been telling her seemed to be punctuated by indignant marks of interrogation in her brightening eyes.

"But it's so amazing. All these dreadful things to be going on in your heart all that time. It truly was awful, and yet it's an immense comfort. It makes things easier—gentler—more just somehow. If they knew—knew this of you—of *you*—this incredible thing—no sinner need ever again despair——"

"But, dearest——"

"Oh! There have been others, yes, of course. Peter and David and the rest, but they're so far away. It—it wasn't like present day sinning somehow, not so helpful—and you're—*you*—you know."

"All the same," she added, when she had slept a little, "although it's delightful to know about your wicked heart, if I'd loved you rightly, with common sense, and some wit, this would never have happened. I should have just dug into your wicked heart till I unearthed the wickedness and—and filled it with love. I can now at last understand many of the reasons for the celibacy of the Clergy."

"That's very likely," said George, "since you're far too ill and worn out to be altogether reasonable. When you're strong again you'll see in enforced celibacy an insult to all women, and it lies with them to refute the calumny."

"But, George," she said shyly, "it's all delightful again in—the delightful things. But the Higher Things—of the Spirit, you know, are exactly where they were. I still—feel too small for them."

"The weight of six foot two of me on your shoulders, poor darling, these two years has been inexorably grinding down the Spirit in you, stifling the best in you. Now

it's off just wait—wait. Don't think of the past or of the future; think of nothing but the present. Just rest and wait, and be a little happy, my heart."

He stooped to kiss her sweet white face.

"It's too fair and seemly a Temple to be lost to God's uses," he said. "And you've paid your full price in sorrow. Some day God will enter in and keep dulness at bay."

"But—but—now—I like the poor. I do really, George. I've got over all that. They came to me—oh! somehow when I was lonely. And once in your heart they stay. Now I couldn't do without them.

"I think—I do really," she said, after a pause, closing her dreamy eyes, "that if it had lasted much longer, I'd have got even to like the brasses and things. When you've sort of gone all to pieces," she said with a little laugh, "you know your hands seem to want to take pity even on brazen vessels."

"Oh! Joan, Joan, Joan!"

"George! I didn't mean to be horrid—I'm, oh! I'm just speaking aloud to myself—and you're after all myself—so you must just listen."

"George," she said later, when again she had slept, "don't mention Heaven, or God, or anything of that sort for a few days. Give me that much time to myself to get ready. I think I love you now—in the right way—or at least in a rightish way, so when I sort things out, the other things being right, and part of you, the best part of them will come too. It's all growing easier every day, and since there's a touch of you in every right thing, it ought surely to be a hall-mark of sufficiency.

"I was thinking last night about such a number of things and I really believe that in a place like Aiken, with the Apostles dead, and curates and things everywhere, the best way to—keep on at things, to keep it up, you know, for the—oh, well, for the weaker kind, is to love and laugh. That would keep things warm in your heart, don't you think, and sweet? And somehow," she paused to reflect, "it would take the sting out of circumstance. We can laugh at ourselves, too," she hastily added, "make it a sort of rule, you know. It will keep things fair, I believe—

I really do believe it might also help the Poem and the sermons."

"That," said George, with his boy's laugh, "that's quite certain. From now on we'll love and laugh, we two, and we'll conquer all before us."

"Lovely," she murmured, "so also was your sunny outlook, though, of course," she added retrospectively, "it lit up everything, only sometimes—sometimes it only made me see the dust motes."

"Oh! Joan! If you knew what a worm you make me feel."

"Then I must be surely delirious again!"

"Love is so extraordinary," said Joan presently, starting from her sleep with a somewhat wild look. "I've had a very odd dream about love and its curious power. Do you think if your father had married Rebecca that the moustache would perhaps not have grown?"

"I shouldn't go so far as to say that," said George thoughtfully, "but I feel sure it would have been modified."

The thought seemingly was in the air, for oddly enough downstairs the two old people, having lived for others through the great sorrow, had just returned to themselves.

After a long, long silence the old Squire all at once stood up bravely and asked Rebecca quietly if she still loved him.

"Have you forgotten the moustache?" she asked slowly with an immense sadness.

"I've forgotten everything but you and my own damned folly," said he.

"Do you love me?" said she.

"Upon my soul, Rebecca, I love you now as I did when I was twenty."

"I have loved you always," said Rebecca, "without one day's interruption, just as I loved you when I was twenty."

He reverently bowed his head. "I'll make it up to you, girl; I'll crowd it all into the years left to us. By God! I will!"

"George," said Joan, when hours later she awoke in the purple dawn to find his face as usual watching hers,

"I'm glad after all that you *did* see me with your own eyes with my head on Rob's arm, I might have forgotten to tell you, you see, and it might perhaps still have left something between us. Oh! It's morning, and—I—I feel just as new!"

THE END.

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